ANOTHER PART OF THE WOOD

DENIS MACKAIL

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Gastonia, N. C.

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BY

DENIS MACKAIL

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1929

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CHAPTER ONE

St. Ethelburga's System and her Going-Away Prize — The kind of girl that Noodles was — Newcliff Central and the citizens of the future — Sickening behaviour of man in canvas gaiters — Ominous accident to Poet Laureate.

I

Miss Mulberry, the head mistress of St. Ethelburga's School at Newcliff-on-Sea, didn't believe in annual or terminal prize-givings, for the modern theory holds that learning is its own reward and that competition for gilt-edged volumes in half-calf is fraught with terrible danger. A certain stimulus was applied to the junior pupils by the publicity of large charts on the classroom walls, on which Industry or Intelligence was shown soaring upwards in red chalk, while Sloth or Stupidity went plunging downwards in blue. Other lines in other tints wobbled about between these two extremes, and were supposed to represent the progress of such students as were neither sheep nor goats; while the whole design — which looked rather like the plan of a shunting-yard and rather like the official returns for a number of simultaneous epidemics — made a great impression on the prospective parents who had come down to look over the school.

'Everything here,' Miss Mulberry would say, as she pointed to this prismatic display, 'is run on a system.'

The prospective parents frowned and nodded. System, they felt, was exactly what their daughters needed, and nothing could be more convincingly systematic than a large chart covered with small squares and bright colours, and symbolical abbreviations and girls' names turned over sideways. What it was all about, they never quite liked to ask — especially with an interrupted lesson waiting for their departure. But as they tramped wearily through the dining-hall and the recreation-room and the dormitories and the workshop and the gymnasium and the sanatorium, or panted up the steep pathway to the playing-fields, or sat exhausted in Miss Mulberry's private study while she did all the cross-examining that they had meant to do themselves, the memory of the large charts filled them with hope and comfort. And then there was the air, which had already nearly blown them out of the taxi on the way up from the station; and the bright sun which dazzled them as it sparkled in Miss Mulberry's spectacles. Oh, yes, St. Ethelburga's was undoubtedly the place for a child like theirs. So spacious and clean and cheerful, with its red brick and white paint and the little clumps of euonymus that rattled outside the window in the purest air on the south coast. Would they care to take this printed list of necessary clothing and so forth away with them? They would. Thank you very much, Miss Mulberry.

2 stout prs. brown shoes with leather soles
2 stout prs. brown shoes with crêpe soles

1 pr. black rubber Wellingtons
1 pr. gymnasium shoes
1 pr. black indoor shoes, with low heels
1 pr. dancing shoes
1 pr. bedroom slippers . . .

The list went on right over the page. The prospective parents saw ruin staring them in the face. But what were the alternatives? Spoiling the daughter's chances by sending her somewhere cheap, or having a governess sitting opposite one at lunch for the next seven or eight years. No, no; welcome bankruptcy and twelve pairs of brown stockings. Let St. Ethelburga's altar be decked with sacrifices, and let System do its utmost. After all, this was mere child's play to what would be happening if the daughter had been a boy.

So the parents rumbled back to the station, and fresh fodder was poured into St. Ethelburga's maw; and really there have been many worse seaside schools than that which was so ably conducted by Miss Mulberry. From a safe distance we accord her the very fullest meed of praise, and assert that she earned every penny of her income. She was, and is, tackling a problem which is utterly insoluble, but at least she has protected a vast quantity of fathers and mothers from the results of their own affection and folly. Moreover, she has never believed that cricket is a good game for girls.

In the upper school — as we were trying to say when we started talking about all those pairs of shoes — there are no coloured charts on the classroom walls. The incentive to labour in the upper school is supposed to be provided by a general feeling of *esprit de corps* — Miss Mulberry is very strong on this phrase — accom-

panied by the fear, which increases as the term proceeds, of being adversely criticized in a document known as one's report. Since Miss Mulberry stopped using English adjectives and started employing letters of the Greek alphabet in these statements, they have become considerably less terrifying, for very few parents can appreciate the refinements of such a code. When one adds that all that most parents bother about is the bill for extras which arrives in the same envelope, and that practically no St. Ethelburgian has ever continued her education elsewhere — except, of course, in lawn tennis and marriage, and things like that — then you will realize that Miss Mulberry presides over no forcing-house for bluestockings. On the other hand, quite a lot of young women have wept when the day came for them to say good-bye to St. Ethelburga for good; and whether this is from dread of the future or regret for the past, it seems an equally eloquent testimonial to the System through which they have drifted. Miss Mulberry is almost motherly at such moments. She pats the departing pupils' hands, and tells them to write to her — not that they ever will — and then she goes over to the cupboard in the corner of her study, and suddenly produces the one tangible prize which St. Ethelburga ever vouchsafes. A fat volume of Lord Tennyson's poems, with the school arms stamped on the cover, and the head mistress's autograph on the fly-leaf. The Going-Away Prize, it is called; but in spite of this, Miss Mulberry's principles remain fixed and unaltered, for there can be no sense of competition in the simple and universal act of leaving the school. Unless you are actually expelled, it is as certain that you will eventually receive that volume of Lord Tennyson's poetry as that to-morrow's

sun will rise. And in making this comparison let us never forget that Nuncliff possesses the highest figures for sunshine on the whole of the south coast.

So on the last day of the spring term word was brought to Noodles Brett, who was watching the luggage being piled on to the station omnibus, that Miss Mulberry was now ready for her. And at this intelligence she put down her hockey-stick and her umbrella, and turned sharp to the left, and marched along the draughty corridor by the dining-hall, and remembered the step in the dark, and turned sharp to the right, and so came to a varnished door on which she knocked, and at which she then listened.

'Come in!' said Miss Mulberry's voice from inside, and Noodles turned the handle and obeyed.

And there were Miss Mulberry's bulbs in the earthenware pots on the window-sill, and there was all the pale-green paint, and the chintz curtains, and the cold, bright little fire, and the framed photographs, and the books and papers, and the vast writing-desk, and the hard chairs, and the Spartan sofa, and the red carpet, and all the other surroundings on which Noodles had gazed before whenever she had been summoned to the Presence.

And there, pretending as usual to be writing something at the vast desk, was Miss Mulberry herself. And after about thirty seconds of this well-established ritual, she pushed the paper away from her, and looked up.

'Well, Ursula,' she said 'So you're leaving us.'

At this point the three other young women, who had this morning provided exceptions to the normal rule by which final departure from St. Ethelburga's takes

place at the end of the summer term, had all begun to sniff, and almost immediately afterwards had burst into tears. Miss Mulberry had then patted their hands, had told them to be sure and write to her, had given them their volume of Lord Tennyson's poetry, and, after chatting with them for a few moments, had dismissed them to three comfortable and happy homes, where three comfortable and happy sets of parents were waiting to lavish money on them, and to give each of them the time of her life until, a little later on, she should fall into the arms of a happy and comfortable husband. And this, when all is said and done, was the normal goal to which Miss Mulberry and Lord Tennyson dismissed about ninety-five per cent of the young women who came knocking at that varnished door.

But Noodles, who was an orphan and wasn't going to be presented at Court, but on the contrary was going back to live with an elderly guardian in the very depths of the country, where (if Miss Mulberry's assumptions were correct) she would have anything but the time of her life; Noodles (Miss Mulberry could hardly fail to notice) was smiling. No nervous, watery smile, either, such as the first kind word might change to sniffs and tears, but a frank, friendly, and companionable sort of smile which for a moment very nearly made the head mistress smile back. But she controlled this unusual impulse, and proceeded with the ordinary formula.

'And what,' she asked, rather more firmly, 'are you going to do?'

'Oh,' said Noodles cheerfully, 'nothing particular, I expect. You see, there isn't much that I *can* do.'

Miss Mulberry let this criticism of nearly seven

years' effort on the part of herself and her staff pass unchallenged. They had all, including Miss Brett, tried their hardest; but even the best of systems could scarcely perform a miracle.

'You'll be living at home then?' she asked.

'Home?' Noodles looked a little puzzled. 'Oh, with Mr. Cottenham, you mean? Oh yes; of course.'

'Well, that won't be so very far away,' said Miss Mulberry brightly.

Noodles smiled, and agreed.

'Let me see,' said Miss Mulberry. 'Your brother's working in London now, isn't he?'

Noodles smiled, and nodded.

'And your aunt? The one who came and saw you here that time?'

'Aunt Caroline?' said Noodles, still smiling. 'Oh, she's abroad. She's always travelling, you know. In fact, she travels and travels.'

As Miss Mulberry had now exhausted all the friends and relations whom Miss Brett was understood to possess, she passed on to the next stage of the formula.

'Well, Ursula,' she said; 'I'm very sorry you're going away from us. It's——'

'Oh, so am I,' said Noodles heartily. 'It's ghastly, isn't it? But—well, you know, I can't help feeling rather pleased.'

'Pleased?' said Miss Mulberry, raising her eyebrows.

'Yes; you see, I've always wanted to be grown-up. I think grown-up people have so much more fun; don't you?'

It was no part of Miss Mulberry's business to think anything of the kind, but she should have known better than to resort even to the mildest form of

sarcasm. She was tired, though, and vexed at the continued absence of tears.

'So you're grown-up now, are you?' she asked.

'Well, not quite,' said Noodles, agreeably. 'But——'

'Yes?' said the head mistress, all ready to score her point.

'But I shall be in five minutes,' laughed Noodles. 'Because in five minutes I shall be an Old Girl.'

Miss Mulberry gave it up as a bad job. If anything happened to this creature —— But that was exactly it. In five minutes, as the creature had just reminded her so gaily, St. Ethelburga's responsibility would have ceased. When the school reassembled at the end of April there would be no Ursula Brett to keep cropping up in one incredible crisis after another; to come oozing through watertight rules and regulations with that friendly smile on her face; to punish herself for crimes which the authorities had tried desperately to ignore; to be a perpetual square peg among so many round ones; to work so hard and to learn so little; to be so constant a source of anxiety and rueful amusement, and, in spite of her looks, to be no more self-conscious now that she was going than on the day when she had first arrived.

'There'll be no one the least like her,' thought Miss Mulberry, as she rose suddenly and went over to the cupboard in the corner of the study. 'And for that I can honestly thank Heaven. And nobody could have been more relieved than I was when Mr. Cottenham decided to take her away. And yet . . .'

Here a vision of the three weeping maidens who had already passed through the room this morning presented itself to the head mistress in the light of some-

thing acutely disgusting. She knew now that she had wanted them and meant them to weep, and that this was the only reason why they had done it. So much for character and self-reliance as imparted by St. Ethelburga to her model pupils. Why, this queer creature who was following her with those large, watchful eyes was worth fifty of them. Well, not in term-time, perhaps; and not for the purpose of doing conventional credit to a very successful school. But at least — so Miss Mulberry realized in a flash of illumination — she was the only one of them who really liked her, and would really read that volume of Lord Tennyson's works.

'Ursula!'

'Yes, Miss Mulberry?'

'I've got a little present for you here. A book to take away with you. I've written your name in it, and —— Why, what's the matter?'

A most extraordinary sound had manifested itself in the back of Noodles's throat.

'My dear child ——'

'Oh, Miss Mulberry — are you really going to gug-give me a gug-going-away prize? Oh ——'

Another even louder and more extraordinary sound shook Miss Brett from head to foot. At the precise moment when all the other young women had stopped crying with the utmost punctuality, her large eyes had filled with enormous tears, and she was feeling blindly for her handkerchief.

'Ug,' she said. 'Gluk. Snumph!'

'My dear Ursula ——'

'Oh, Miss Mulberry — I never thought I'd gug-get one. I know I've been the most disap-pup-pointing sort of girl. I know I've been *awful*. And they all said you'd never gug-give me anything, and ——'

'What?' said Miss Mulberry sharply. 'Who told you that?'

Noodles shuddered and shook her head.

'Did the other girls say so? Or any of the mistresses?'

Noddles looked excessively stupid and sullen.

'I oughtn't to have — ug — said that,' she growled. 'It was a mum-mistake.'

'But ——'

'It wasn't true,' said Noodles blankly.

'I shouldn't have asked you,' said Miss Mulberry, reluctantly yielding to the code of honour. 'But it doesn't matter, Ursula, because whoever said so was talking nonsense. I want you very much to have this book, and ——'

'Oh, Miss Mulberry!'

'What?'

'I am so *terribly* grateful. Thank you *most* frightfully.'

'There, there,' said Miss Mulberry.

She then tried to pat one of Miss Brett's hands, and was a little surprised to find that, through an obvious misunderstanding, she was shaking it instead.

'Good-bye,' said Noodles, huskily but quite coherently. 'And thank you most ——'

'Good-bye, Ursula,' said Miss Mulberry, coming a little nearer for the farewell kiss.

'And jolly good luck,' said Noodles, turning round and opening the door. She was quite herself again, and quite unconscious that she had turned the whole interview upside-down and left the farewell kiss high and dry. She rushed off down the corridor, occasionally throwing Lord Tennyson up into the air and catching him again. Miss Mulberry slowly resumed her seat at

the vast writing-desk, and stared in some bewilderment at nothing at all.

2

Newcliff Central Station presents a curious and somewhat alarming spectacle at the end of any of the three scholastic terms. Ordinarily — except during the Whitsun and August spates — a rather sombre kind of terminus, with a few middle-aged residents chatting quietly to the invalid aunts whom they are sending back to Malvern or Cheltenham, or perhaps a couple of quiet clergymen welcoming a *locum tenens* from Bournemouth or Reading, it is suddenly seized with the spirit of carnival at these breaking-up seasons, and for several days in succession echoes to the sound of juvenile pandemonium. The citizens of the future arrive in great numbers and in a high state of excitement, dropping fragments of their hand-baggage wherever they go, losing their tickets, scrambling in and out of the wrong trains, raiding the confectionery-stall, testing the reverberations from the glass roof, swinging on the carriage doors, and generally speaking celebrating their return to freedom with the utmost merriment and licence. The male citizens show a disposition to indulge in intermittent wrestling-matches, to throw each other's hats on to the permanent way, and to weigh themselves, often two or three at a time, on the penny-in-the-slot machines. The female citizens display an unaccountable desire to travel fifteen in a compartment, and while awaiting this pleasurable experience they sing and dance all up and down the long platforms, to the great inconvenience of the porters who have taken charge of their trunks and bicycles.

Yet, on the whole, the porters rather welcome these breaks in their everyday routine, for if on the one hand they have to work a little harder and faster than usual, then on the other hand they are particularly well paid for it. It is quite true that some of the citizens of the future forget to reward them altogether, and that others offer them two hot halfpennies firmly embedded in an acid-drop; but the vast majority are already victims of the illusion that the more you tip the more you show yourself to be an independent man or woman of the world. And the travelling-money which has been dealt out at the beginning of the journey often disappears entirely into the hands which know so well how to foster this belief.

If you are in the right mood for it, and have not actually got to share a carriage with those jigging arms and legs, it is a pleasant enough scene; for there can be no question that the citizens are enjoying themselves. Even the shortest holiday seems endless when viewed from the departure platforms of Newcliff Central, and the arrival platforms which are lurking all the while under the other span of the glass roof convey no warning message on the very day that the citizens have broken up. Away they go, with their heads protruding suicidally from the windows, and a last shower of hats, gloves, magazines, and handkerchiefs fluttering on to the six-foot way. A prolonged scream accompanies the whistle of the engine, as it plunges into the tunnel beyond the gasometers. A red light blinks in the darkness, and vanishes. But already the porters are lining up to greet a fresh inrush of vehicles from St. Winefride's or St. Wilfrid's or Mr. Dudgeon's establishment for backward boys, and thus the great educational dispersal continues until the last

school has emptied and the last tennis-racquet has been taken to the lost-property office. Then Newcliff settles down to rest again, and to dream, perhaps, of the distant days when it was just an ugly little fishing-village, before the sea breezes had covered its skyline with brick and slate and flagstaffs and goal-posts. Presently even the masters and mistresses depart, and the caretakers' children have the playing-fields to themselves.

So the omnibus from St. Ethelburga's came clattering down the hill, and along the esplanade, and up Queen Street, and finally drew to a standstill in the station yard. And the porters began unloading it, and the passengers came pouring out of it, and Noodles Brett — who was now grown-up, though she looked very much like the Noodles of half an hour ago — sprang on to the cobblestones, and whirled into the booking-hall, and in due course found herself in front of a small window with a wire grill, where she demanded, received, and paid one and elevenpence-halfpenny for a third-class ticket to Pippingfold — which, as Miss Mulberry had truly observed, was not so very far away. The pressure from her ex-colleagues and others then drove her on towards an enormous pile of luggage, where she identified a very shabby brown trunk and had it labelled to the same destination; and after this she proceeded to Platform Number One, where the ex-colleagues and others were all waiting for the London express. Not until this had come and gone would the local train appear which was to take her back to Mr. Cottenham.

For the next ten minutes or so, having propped her umbrella, hockey-stick, and Going-Away Prize against her battered dressing-case, she played a series of

selections on the small stringed-instrument which also formed part of her hand-baggage. Sometimes she sang as she played, and the ex-colleagues, gathering round her, both sang and danced. 'Go on!' they said, whenever she showed signs of stopping, and on she went; twanging away with great brilliancy and accuracy, except when she attempted a very difficult refinement known as the upward roll. 'Rotten!' said the ex-colleagues at such moments, and Noodles smiled and resumed her simpler and more straightforward twanging, while the feet of the dancers twinkled like summer rain.

Presently, with a frightful hissing, the London express backed in from where it had been standing by the gasometers, and the dance changed into a mad rush for corner seats. The twanging ceased, and the stringed-instrument was laid carefully down on the battered dressing-case. 'Good-bye!' shouted the ex-colleagues. 'Good-bye!' shouted Noodles, passing swiftly from window to window. Doors were slammed, opened, and slammed again. Orange-peel and tinfoil kept showering on the platform. The long train rocked and shuddered as the educational trunks and suitcases were hurled into the van, and as the citizens of the future jumped up and down and screamed. Now we're off. No, we're not. Stand back there, please. Slam. Bang. Wild charge by contingent of backward boys who have been gaping into the signal-box on one of the arrival platforms, and have just been found there by one of Mr. Dudgeon's long-suffering assistants. Hurry up there, please. Bang. Slam. High, reedy chanting by the junior students of St. Winefride's, whose obvious intention it is to pass the entire journey in the corridor. A green flag. A shrill

hoot from the distant engine. Accelerando of mighty snorts as it battles with the inertia of its load. Slowly it puffs away into the sunlight, and out of the sunlight into the tunnel. Again the red light glitters and disappears. Mr. Dudgeon's long-suffering assistant wipes his forehead, and hurries off to start his own packing. The porters are already assembling for their next appointment with the special time-table. Noodles is left alone.

'I don't mind a bit,' she is saying to herself. 'I'm thankful I'm not staying on for another term. One always feels a bit stupid when one sees a train going off like that, but it would be absurd when I'm more than eighteen.'

She sits down on a deserted bench, picks up the stringed-instrument, twangs a few subdued chords, and puts it back.

'Of course it'll be a bit dull at Pippingfold,' she is thinking. 'But I dare say Beaky'll come down for Easter, and anyhow I'm grown-up now so that I can do all sorts of things that I couldn't do before. At least—— Oh, well, one's almost bound to have some adventures after one's left school for good. Nobody could possibly just go on living in the country for ever. If only I'd got any money, I think I'd travel — like Aunt Caroline. I wonder what it feels like in one of those big ships, like in that picture there.'

She gets up, and examines the coloured poster of an Atlantic liner which has been pasted up near the door of the general waiting-room on Platform Number One. It steams majestically through a very choppy sea, in which a quantity of smaller vessels appear to be in imminent danger of foundering.

'I think I'd like to sleep up there,' murmurs Noodles,

as she plants her forefinger on the captain's bridge. 'You'd get such an awfully good view.'

Further examples from Newcliff Central's art gallery draw her gradually on towards the sunlight. A ruined abbey rather takes her fancy as a residence in which 'things might happen.' A view of Edinburgh produces an expression of wistfulness, for she has always taken an affectionate interest in Mary, Queen of Scots. A lake in Ireland reminds her of Snubs Tipton, her brother Beaky's friend and fellow-lodger in London, for the rather remote reason that Snubs's father (whom she has never met) used to fish when he lived in Devonshire. But she frowns at a semi-humorous picture of two dogs labelled for conveyance in a guard's van; for though Mr. Cottenham has never let her have a dog of her own, she is convinced by some powerful instinct that they will be miserable in such inhuman quarters.

And then there is a rumbling and jolting behind her, as the short and very dirty local train is pushed alongside the platform by its stumpy and very dirty engine. No more art gallery, and — rather a thrilling thought — no more Newcliff. Miss Brett leaves the imaginary dogs to their fate, and runs back to gather up her belongings.

3

The local train followed its usual deliberate habits. Its engine left it and went for a little run by itself; came back presently with an empty horse-box, and hit the other coaches so as to show them what it had found; then stood still and panted as if it had just fetched somebody's stick out of the water, or occasionally sighed as if it were the most misunderstood engine

on the whole of the line. Meanwhile the porters came back and played a game with some milk-cans and large wooden boxes, pausing every now and then as though they weren't quite certain of the rules, and then beginning again with more noise than ever. A man in a cloth cap and blue cotton suit came climbing along the footboard on the off side, staring in at the windows and whistling; and another man walked very heavily up and down the roof. During these preparations for departure, Noodles read the first three poems in her Going-Away Prize, without deriving any very definite impression from them except that their heroines had awfully queer names — though the author might well have been excused for thinking them less queer than her own. And then the stumpy engine suddenly thrust its neck into the collar and tugged the horse-box and the dirty coaches right past the gasometers and through the tunnel and nearly five hundred yards beyond it, after which effort it stopped again — and again panted and sighed — at that outpost of civilization known as Newcliff Junction, which was the point where the single line branched off towards Pippingfold and the valley of the Clewer.

And here Noodles was constrained to take her feet off the opposite cushion by the entrance of a fat woman, a thin woman, a little girl, a little boy, and a man with canvas gaiters. They all stared at her, and she stared at them. The fat woman then asked her if she thought this was the train for Friar's Holt, and Noodles said she thought it was. As a matter of fact, she knew perfectly well that it was, but it seemed politer somehow not to appear too certain. Then the thin woman asked the man in canvas gaiters if *he* thought it was the train for Friar's Holt, and the man

in canvas gaiters said that was quite right. Notwithstanding this double assurance, both women then plucked the children away from the window, and leant out of it and asked a very old man of an agricultural aspect for his views on the matter, and when the old man said he didn't know, they were thrown into a great state of alarm, and slapped the children, and started getting out again. At this stage an adolescent porter came by and tried to take their bags and parcels away from them. In reply to the same inquiry, however, he admitted that this was undoubtedly the train for Friar's Holt; whereupon the women became extremely flustered, slapped the children again, recovered their booty, and darted back into the compartment. They then sat down with an air of having done something exceptionally clever, and Newcliff Junction gave a jerk and began sliding away backwards. The wheels ground against the sharp curve of the rails, the scenery changed from back-gardens with washing and aërials to a deep cutting covered with primroses, and Noodles started reading a poem called Leonine Elegiacs and wondered again why poetry was written in such awfully queer language, and why they were always leaving letters out and putting apostrophes in instead — even when it sounded just the same as before.

And the local train jolted out of the cutting, and whistled through Snickley Halt, and crawled across the marshes, and slowed down, and stopped. And as they had now reached Friar's Holt, the fat woman and the thin woman slapped the two children again, and ejected them, and ejected themselves, and looked very suspicious when Noodles handed them the string bag which they had overlooked, and were last seen all

standing still on the platform as though they expected it to begin moving presently and to take them to their ultimate destination.

And the man in canvas gaiters coughed, and crossed his legs.

'Bother!' said Noodles to herself. 'This is the kind of man who talks to one. I wish they wouldn't.' And she started reading about yet another awfully queer woman called Mariana.

'Do you mind if I smoke, miss?' said the man.

'Not in the least,' said Noodles.

'Thank you, miss,' said the man, and he got up and came and sat down opposite her. Noodles allowed herself to see nothing but his gaiters, but she could hear the rustling of paper, and presently she could smell his rather pungent cigarette. 'I wonder what would happen,' she thought, 'if I went and sat in the other corner.' But perhaps that would look rude. Perhaps, also, she had been wrong in her classification, for the man was preserving an unbroken silence. Except that he still coughed every now and then.

The train rumbled into Sawbridge and Wissingfield Station, and rumbled out again. 'It would have looked silly,' Noodles was thinking, 'if I'd got out and got into another carriage. Besides, he might have tried to help me with my things.' She took a quick glance at the smoking stranger, and he flung the end of his cigarette out of the window.

'Going far, miss?' he asked.

'What?' said Noodles.

'Nice day,' said the man.

'Oh, lovely,' said Noodles.

'I say,' said the man, leaning forward suddenly; 'you don't know of a place for a stable-hand, do you, miss?'

'I'm awfully sorry,' said Noodles, 'but I'm afraid I don't.'

'I've been in the 'orspital, you see,' said the man. 'I 'ad a promise of a job, but that's the way they treat you nowadays.'

The ellipsis here beat anything attempted by Lord Tennyson, but on the other hand even Lilian's or Claribel's heart could hardly have been softer than Miss Brett's. She could no more withhold a look of sympathy than she could understand why it was being demanded.

'It's these motor-cars that done it,' said the man, leaving Noodles to guess whether he had been run over or was suffering from the competition of mechanical traction. 'Six weeks I was there, miss, and didn't ought to be out yet. You can see that, cancher, miss?'

The man looked particularly healthy, but one certainly didn't want him to go into details.

'How ghastly!' said Noodles. 'I'm most awfully sorry.'

'Don't think I'm complaining, miss,' said the man, leaning nearer still. 'But I wouldn't wish to mislead you. I wouldn't wish you to think "There's a man asking for a reckermendation what doesn't deserve it." I could show you a letter from Colonel Williams — you know 'im, don't you, miss?'

'I'm afraid I don't,' said Noodles apologetically.

'Wot!' The man in gaiters seemed to be stunned by this answer. The whole bottom had fallen out of his world, if Noodles didn't know Colonel Williams. 'But I've got the letter 'ere,' he protested, thumping himself on the side of his jacket. 'You'll believe that, won't you, miss?'

'Oh, of course,' said Noodles.

'Well, then,' said the man, sitting back again — very much to Noodles's relief; 'you can tell your father — see? — when you get 'ome. You tell 'im I'll take any job 'e fancies. See? Any job what'll keep me going. See? You tell 'im from me ——'

'But I can't,' said Noodles faintly. Nothing would induce her to explain that she hadn't got a father, whatever this unfortunate stranger might think. And the same negative undoubtedly covered Mr. Cottenham, who had no vacancies on his small staff and was always saying how poor he was. How could one and why should one arrive back from school with a message like that, for parent, guardian, or anyone else? 'He must *know* I'm not the sort of person to get jobs for people,' said Noodles to herself. But whether the unfortunate stranger knew this or not — and on the whole it appears possible that he did — he seemed quite incapable of closing or changing the subject.

'Can't, miss?' he echoed hoarsely. 'But where do you think I'm a-going to sleep to-night?'

Noodles didn't know. It seemed to depend, very largely, on how far he travelled up the valley of the Clewer. But why spend one's little all on a third-class ticket and a packet of cigarettes, if —— No; how would *she* like to have spent six weeks in a hospital? She'd have hated it. And he couldn't be an impostor, because he had that letter from Colonel Williams. It was awful, the way the world was full of people who hadn't got any money. 'Dash!' said Noodles to herself. 'I suppose I'll have to give him that half-crown, and it's absolutely all I've got left, and I shan't get my allowance for nearly three weeks. I don't suppose it would be the faintest use asking him for change.'

She glanced at the unfortunate stranger again, as if

hoping to see something in his expression or appearance that might let her off; but she saw nothing of the sort. In the light of his recent observations he was hardly recognizable as the perfectly ordinary passenger who had got into the train at the Junction. He had shrunk, and sagged; his clothes had become more threadbare; his whole aspect more pitiful and helpless. Even his complexion seemed no longer a sign of health, but a symptom of the disease for which he still ought really to be having hospital treatment. As the train hiccuped over the points by the brickworks, half a mile this side of Pippingfold, Noodles reached an inevitable decision, and at the same moment thanked her stars that she had not reached it too late.

'— not asking for charity,' the man was muttering hypnotically.

'No, no,' said Noodles, standing up and feeling for her dressing-bag on the rack. 'Of course not.'

The man's eyes followed her greedily.

'But if everyone 'ad your kind 'eart, miss . . .'

The dressing-bag seemed to have become wedged into a tangle with the stringed-instrument, the hockey-stick, and the umbrella; and as Noodles climbed on to the seat and tugged at it, the point of this last piece of property slipped through the meshes of the netting, making the deadlock even more complete than before.

'Bother!'

'Can I 'elp you, missie?'

'No, thank you. I can manage it if —— There!'

There, indeed. The brakes of that local train were always less remarkable for their delicacy than their power, and particularly was this the case on a sharp down-grade such as that which marks the approach to Pippingfold. Even so, however, Noodles would proba-

bly have recovered herself if she hadn't been standing on the seat, and if the hockey-stick hadn't chosen that precise moment to come loose from the general jumble — which it certainly wouldn't have done if she hadn't been pulling it quite so hard. And even then it wouldn't have caught the unfortunate stranger such a frightful whack on the side of the head, if in his eagerness to snatch at Noodles's purse as soon as it appeared — for there is really no other explanation for his behaviour both before and after this accident — he hadn't been standing on tiptoe just behind her.

So at the word 'There!' all these things happened in far less time than it takes to describe; and the man gave a squeal of surprise and agony, and Noodles gave a squeal of surprise and remorse; and the stout little station-master came trotting up, and opened the door, and began shouting very excitedly; and the porter and the man who drives the hired Ford came trundling to his assistance, also shouting; and the station-master said, 'Well done, miss. We've got 'im this time'; and the man in gaiters opened the other door and jumped out on the line, and ran away, and disappeared — though not before the engine-driver had tried to hit him with a piece of coal at a distance of about seventy-five yards, and had failed in this gallant attempt. And the heroic Noodles descended from the compartment by the more conventional exit, to find that no amount of explanation could check the plaudits of a crowd which now consisted of no less than five persons.

'But it was a mistake,' she said. 'I didn't mean to hurt him.'

'Got 'im proper,' said the crowd to each other, without listening to a word that she uttered. 'That'll larn 'im,' they said.

So Noodles laughed, and was accompanied in triumph to the hired Ford, and drove away amidst cheering with her shabby trunk and her battered dressing-case and her stringed-instrument and her hockey-stick and her umbrella and ——

'Oh, *dash!*' said Noodles.

For she had gone and left her Going-Away Prize in the train.

CHAPTER TWO

The state of Noodles's brother's heart — Miraculous encounter at a musical party — Sylvia's photograph and a word of six letters — Silence of Snubs Tipton.

I

BEAKY wrote and said that he was coming down for Easter, and would Noodles find out if Mr. Cottenham felt like having Snubs Tipton as well. So Noodles chose what she thought was a good moment, which was while Mr. Cottenham was on the way back to his study from the dining-room, and he stopped, and looked over his spectacles, and looked away again, and straightened one of the Piranesis on the passage wall, and sighed, and looked at Noodles, and muttered something about its having nothing to do with him, and paddled off to his books and papers. So then Noodles understood that it was all right about Snubs, and she wrote back to Beaky and said so.

'Darling Beaky, I'm thankful you're coming for your little holiday, and I've asked about Snubs and that will be absolutely [? all right]. I'm thankful you're both coming, as it is awfully dull at present. Nothing has happened since I got here, and the village seems absolutely empty. They have had foot and mouth and everybody has gone away in disgust. I was hoping to play Tennis at Mrs. Shirley's but they have gone away too and won't be back till May and then only for week-ends. Mind you bring some new Records when you come. With love from Noodles.'

But three days later Beaky wrote back and said that he wasn't coming at all, offering as a vague sort of

excuse the statement that Snubs had got a lot of work at the office. Mr. Cottenham bore up wonderfully on hearing of this change of plan, observing as before that it had got nothing to do with him, and again melting away into his study. But Noodles wrote another letter beginning 'Darling Beaky, you are a beast and I hate you,' and ending, in the first draft, 'P.S. Rude messages to Snubs.'

Later, a second postscript was added, making an urgent appeal for more gramophone records — 'even old ones, or ones you are sick of' — but they didn't come, and the correspondence proceeded no further. It would have been rather an exceptional outburst of penmanship on both sides if it had. Yet as a matter of fact Beaky had actually started making up a parcel of old records for Miss Ursula Brett, The Manor House, Pippingfold, on the day that he suddenly saw Miss Sylvia Shirley driving down Oxford Street in a taxicab. And from that moment poor Noodles was absolutely forgotten.

For if Miss Sylvia Shirley were driving down Oxford Street in a taxicab, it meant that she was not abroad — as he had somehow gathered from Noodles's first letter — but was in London. His heart beat with great violence as he reached this deduction, and he accidentally lit the cork end of his next cigarette. Something, thought Beaky, had got to be done about this; which was a development of a rather similar idea that had struck him on first meeting Miss Shirley down at Pippingfold at Christmas. He and she and Noodles — and somebody else, he afterwards supposed — had then played tennis on the hard court at Green Hatches, which Mrs. Shirley had just taken. In three days they had reached Christian names, or their equivalent in

the case of the Bretts, and there things had stuck. Noodles had most tiresomely caught a cold, and he had funked going over to Green Hatches by himself. Then he had come back to Wykeham Street and the City, and then — well, he hadn't exactly liked to call at Mrs. Shirley's house in London, because she hadn't exactly suggested it. And he hadn't exactly liked to write to Sylvia, because there wasn't exactly anything to write about. Besides, it was all so absolutely out of the question that it was honestly far better to keep one's balance while one still had the chance.

Sometimes this attitude seemed so cowardly and cold-blooded that young Mr. Brett despised himself. At other times it seemed rather clever. But in either case the original impulse to do something about it all remained suspended through January, February, and March. 'There you are,' said Beaky to himself, at intervals. 'I've got over it. It wasn't anything.' Still, why go down to Pippingfold at Easter, when it always rained, if Green Hatches were going to be shut up?

'What do you say, Snubs? Shall we stay where we are?'

Snubs, who in the circumstances could hardly say anything else, said that he didn't mind what they did. He may or may not have muttered some polite exaggeration about his work, but it was enough for Beaky, who knew quite well that Mr. Cottenham wouldn't mind either. As for Noodles — well, it could only have been three nights at the outside, even if Snubs hadn't gone and cracked one of his pistons which meant travelling like sardines by train. Then came the vision in the taxicab, and everything else was forgotten.

'Steady!' said Beaky to himself, and looked up Mrs. Shirley's number in the telephone-directory. The accompanying address, in Dolphin Street, was another jolting reminder of his own inadequate income. There ought to be more one day, of course, and even a bit of capital if his guardian could be squared; but Dolphin Street, he couldn't help feeling, might expect rather more than that.

'I see, Mr. Brett. And what sort of settlement would you be prepared to make on my daughter?'

Help! The telephone-directory was flung back on the floor, and young Mr. Brett made a powerful effort to recover the equilibrium of January, February, and March. How successful he was may be gathered from the fact that the following Sunday afternoon found him wandering through Dolphin Street, more or less disguised by an umbrella pulled tightly against the crown of his hat. From this moving ambush he observed, to his horror, that the blinds of Mrs. Shirley's house were down and the shutters were closed. They were away. They were abroad, perhaps. Or even in America or India.

Supposing he rang the bell, and asked.

At this moment a dark stranger suddenly forced his way past him, and disappeared down the area steps. Too late Mr. Brett recognized Mrs. Shirley's butler, with whom he had had some dealings at Christmas, and forgetting how completely he was screened by the umbrella and the rain and the Sunday afternoon twilight, he ran away in blind panic and only stopped because he was nearly run over by a bicyclist.

'Oh, well,' he said to himself, 'if they're really abroad, then it isn't the faintest use doing anything. I expect the next thing I'll hear is that she's engaged to somebody, and that'll settle it.'

This ignoble mood even brought a certain amount of ignoble comfort — though it was a fitful sort of business which continued to alternate with a great deal of equally unfounded hope and despair. But any expectation of working his way back to the *status quo* was shattered by the innocent agency of Snubs Tipton.

'Look here,' said Snubs, later in the week; 'I've *got* to go, because the Framlinghams are friends of my people, and this is the fourth time they've asked me. I've no doubt it'll be perfectly frightful, because it says "Music" in the corner of the card, and we all know what that means. But if you've got the decency of a louse, you'll come too. After all, I mean, it was dashed kind of them to ask you.'

Beaky's own opinion was that it was dashed unnecessary, seeing that the Framlinghams had never met him, and knew nothing about him except that he shared digs with the son of their old friends. He said something to this effect, and was about to add that he had never laid claim to decency in any shape or form, when he suddenly realized that if he were left alone that evening he would probably hang himself.

'All right,' he said, magnanimously. 'If your governor will go off and govern a lot of black men, I suppose you've got to face it. I'll come.'

'Thanks,' said Snubs.

'But,' said Beaky fiercely, 'if you leave me alone once we've got there ——'

'Oh, I won't do that. I shan't know a soul.'

'Music!' said Beaky witheringly. 'My boot!'

So after dinner they both dressed up in clean shirts and white ties, and walked along till they came to the Framlinghams' strip of red carpet, and threw their cigarettes into the gutter, and marched up the steps,

and gave their hats and coats to a white-haired hireling with his mouth full of pins, and pulled down the fronts of their waistcoats, and removed all vestige of expression from their features, and started climbing the long stairs on tiptoe because the people at the top were all whispering, which was their tribute to the string quartette that was wailing in the crowded drawing-room.

'This is all right,' said Beaky, in a low voice. 'We shan't be able to get in.'

'Must,' muttered Snubs. 'No good coming if they never see us.'

'Go on, then,' said Beaky, out of the side of his mouth.

The landing was covered with late arrivals, who showed how little they minded their position by instantly making a sort of lane for the party from Wykeham Street. 'Go on!' they whispered unselfishly. At the end of the lane an enormous quantity of men and women were sitting, packed very closely together, on little gilt chairs. Most of them were suffering acutely. The lights were far too bright, the chairs far too small, the string quartette far, far too industrious. The only consolation in their cup was that nobody expects you to look anything but careworn and dismal during a programme of classical chamber-music — except, of course, after one of those very short encores, when the correct procedure is to titter insanely. The majority of victims clutched at little printed sheets of paper, which they kept folding and unfolding in the faint hope, apparently, that this process might have caused one or more of the items to disappear. They thought with sorrow of their past, present and future lives, and took violent dislikes to the backs of the people just in front

of them. When the string quartette played gently, you heard their clothes creaking. When it played loudly, there was an immediate outburst of suspended coughing. Did one clap now, or was that only the end of another movement? If you clapped at the end of a movement, you were a cad. The string quartette frowned whenever this happened.

Lady Framlingham sat uneasily on a little gilt chair of her own just inside the doorway. Occasionally she tapped her foot or waved her large, ostrich-feather fan or tittered insanely, so as to show that she was listening to the very expensive music — which she would really have enjoyed, poor woman, if she could only have forgotten her responsibilities; but her eyes roved perpetually out onto the landing, beckoning to the guests who were rash enough to come within range, summoning them over the threshold, and directing them to pass on round the corner, where she was under the mistaken impression that there were still a few vacant seats. The doomed guests bowed, waggled their eyebrows at her, smiled in a horrible rictus, and sidled right into the trap — a *cul-de-sac* crammed and jammed with human beings on their hind legs, and no hope of escape until the string quartette had done its worst. The applause from this quarter of the room was extremely perfunctory, while the atmosphere was strongly reminiscent of the Black Hole of Calcutta. A fact not generally known, but perhaps worth mentioning, was that Sir Herbert Framlingham himself was concealed somewhere in this part of the crowd. There seems no reason to believe that he was enjoying himself.

So Snubs's fate was more or less sealed. He bowed and smiled at his hostess, and she laid a finger on her

lips and smiled back at him. And then she jerked her head in such a manner as to compel him onwards and round the corner, and he called to mind the undoubted truth that he had missed three of these parties and that he was answerable for the honour of his parents, who were nearly four thousand miles away, and that it would all be over in another hour or so at the outside; and he wedged and insinuated himself into the throng, and let the string quartette interrupt his thoughts as little as possible while he played an imaginary game of golf on a mixture of several well-known courses. For Snubs was a philosopher, and had infinite resources in his own peculiar mind.

But Beaky had a most extraordinary piece of luck. There he was, hot on his companion's heels in the doorway, all ready to twist his features into the most dreadful, silent grin and to be sucked forward into the congested vacuum of the back-drawing-room, when suddenly he felt a gentle tug at one of the tails of his dress-coat, and at the same instant a voice murmured the significant word 'Hullo.'

He shot into reverse, so abruptly as to fling another gentleman right into Lady Framlingham's net. He side-stepped. He gasped.

It was Sylvia. She was making that sort of face with her mouth — the description is Beaky's, and not ours — which had fascinated him last Christmas and now fascinated him again.

'Hull-o!' he whispered, beaming all over. 'I say ——'

'Sh!'

'What?'

Sylvia made another, and equally fascinating face with her eyes.

'Let's come,' said Beaky, translating the message and repeating it as one of his own.

'Where?' said Sylvia, beginning to come.

'Downstairs,' said Beaky, edging further and further away from the perilous doorway. 'Let's — let's ——'

'Oh, but we can't,' said Sylvia, as she followed him. 'We mustn't be rude.'

'I saw you the other day,' said Beaky, pausing for a moment in his descent.

'Oh, where?'

Marvellous girl! He'd forgotten that expression of eager interest, but it was even more fascinating than the others. And the slight huskiness of the voice. It made him blink, and catch at the banisters.

'In a taxi,' he said. 'In Oxford Street. In a blue hat.'

'Yes,' said the husky voice. 'That was me. But I never saw you.'

'Oh, of course not. I say, is your mother here?'

'Yes. Upstairs. I ought to be with her really.'

'Oh, no. I say, I never knew you were in London.'

'Oh, yes. I say, how's your sister?'

'Noodles? She's down at Pippingfold. She's left school, you know.'

'Oh, what fun!'

'I say, shall we come in here?'

'What do you think it is?'

'Dining-room, I should say. I say, will you have a sandwich or something?'

'Oh, no. We mustn't start eating by ourselves.'

('We,' thought Beaky. 'Ourselves.' Gosh!)

'I say,' he said, aloud. 'I nearly called on you the other day.'

'Oh, why didn't you?'

'Well, I didn't know — I mean, I thought —— Well, 's a matter of fact, the house seemed to be shut up.'

'When?'

'On Sunday.'

'Oh, of course it was. We were in Norfolk.'

Beaky immediately experienced a violent spasm of jealous loathing for the whole of this large county, which caused him to gulp and clench his teeth.

'What?' said Miss Shirley.

'Nothing. I say, shall we sit down somewhere? Here, I mean?'

'Oh, wouldn't that be rather rude? I mean, oughtn't we to try and go upstairs?'

'I don't see why. The room's bursting already. Besides ——'

'Oh, do tell me!'

'I can't stand that sort of music. Can you?'

(Oh, Lord! What if he'd gone too far? What if she liked it?)

'I think it's absolutely foul,' said Miss Shirley, with great emphasis, and the most fascinating face of all. 'But I adore the other kind.'

'The ordinary kind, you mean?'

'Yes.'

Miss Shirley began to dance; slowly; then more quickly; then like an inspired marionette.

'I say,' said Beaky. 'That's rather good. What was that last bit?'

Miss Shirley did it again.

'By Jove!' said Beaky, attempting to imitate her.

'No, no. More like this.'

'Oh, I see. Like that?'

'Yes.'

They were both dancing — opposite each other, and at a distance of about six feet — when the white-haired hireling looked in at the door, and they stopped.

'I ought to go upstairs, really,' said Sylvia.

'Oh, don't do that,' said Beaky. 'They'll all be coming down in a minute.'

'Will they?'

'Sure to be. I say, when are you going down to Pippingfold again?'

'Well, not just yet. Mummie's having it altered, you know. It's full of builders.'

'Why, what was wrong with it?'

'Oh, nothing. But Mummie always does that, and as soon as she's done it, she always goes somewhere else. It amuses her.'

And what better reason could there be? But it didn't amuse young Mr. Brett.

'I say,' he gasped. 'You don't mean you'll be leaving again?'

'Bound to,' said Sylvia. 'Sooner or later. Mummie never stays anywhere.'

'Oh, I say . . .'

'What?'

'Nothing. I say, do you suppose she'd have a fit if I did come and call one day? In London, I mean?'

'I shouldn't think so,' said Miss Shirley, showing no surprise at this rather remarkable question. 'Why don't you?'

'By Jove!' said Beaky.

'Here they all come,' said Miss Shirley.

And here they all came — roaring down the stairs, and ravenous after the strain of the string quartette. A horrible noise they made, and very bad at getting out of each other's way they were, but before you knew

where you were they were all shouting and munching and shoving and turning the dining-room into a second Black Hole. Their laughter was perhaps the most nauseating sound of all. Beaky was still craning his neck to see what on earth had happened to Miss Shirley, when he suddenly found himself face to face with Snubs.

'Hullo,' he said vaguely.

'Come on,' said Snubs. 'I've just heard somebody say they're going to play again. You don't want any food, do you?'

'No, but ——'

'Well, buck up, then. We can get out of this other door.'

'Yes, but ——'

'What's the matter? What do you keep looking at?'

'Nothing,' said Beaky. 'I'm ready.'

It was true, apparently, that Mrs. Shirley never stayed anywhere, for he had just seen her and her daughter slipping past the red-baize racks in the hall. They were wearing their cloaks.

'Steady!' said Snubs. 'Don't go giving the show away.'

They beat an orderly retreat after all, for it was impossible to do anything else.

'That's better,' said Snubs, as they reached the pavement. 'Thanks awfully.'

'What for?' said Beaky, watching a tail-light vanish in the distance.

'Sticking it out,' said Snubs.

Beaky was rather ashamed of himself, but there was really nothing on earth that he could say.

2

'Just a minute,' said Sylvia. 'What do you think of these?'

('I've stayed here far too long,' Beaky was thinking. 'Gosh, I've stayed here more than an hour. I expect I've done for myself. I don't suppose they'll ever let me into the house again.')

'In here,' said Sylvia, still leading the way down. 'They came last night.'

'What?'

'Through here.'

('What was that she said?' Beaky was asking himself. 'I say, where are we going now?')

'Mind this little dark step that you can't see.'

'What?'

They had turned the corner at the foot of the stairs, and Sylvia had opened a door. Beaky plunged heavily over the invisible step — for there had been something particularly slow about his reactions ever since he had got up to go, and he only heard the warning as he snatched at the banisters and recovered himself.

'In here,' said Sylvia again.

They were both in the little room behind the dining-room, and though it seemed untidy and unused there was a thrill in its intimacy. Some minds might have reflected: 'This is the place where the masseuse is kept waiting, or where they put the furniture that they don't much like.' But Beaky thought: 'I dare say lots of people who know her quite well have never been in here.' And again she spoke, and he never heard her.

'What do you think of these?' she was saying.

There was a crackling of brown paper, and his wandering wits returned from the view of the brick wall out of the back window.

'Oh, I say! May I look?'

'Yes, of course. That's what I keep saying.'

'I say — they're topping. Don't you think so?'

Miss Shirley spread the photographs more widely over the table, and examined them with her head on one side — and with a most fascinating narrowing of the eyelids.

'I don't know,' she said critically. 'They've made me look awfully sort-of-stupid, I think.'

'Oh, no!' cried Beaky. 'I think you look — well — I mean. . .'

He gave it up, and stared until he could hardly see. There were two views of the enchanting subject. A full-face, with those eyes. A profile, with the line of that neck. Gosh, what luck some photographers had!

'The others are all the same,' said Miss Shirley, pushing them aside. 'Which do you prefer?'

Even Paris had never been asked for a judgment like this.

'Well . . .' said Beaky, slowly. 'I mean . . .' And then, suddenly: 'I say — Sylvia.'

''M?'

'I — I suppose' (a nervous laugh here) — 'I suppose you wouldn't care to let me have one of them. I mean, if there was a spare one. I mean ——'

'Oh, rubbish, Beaky. You don't want ——'

'Yes, I do. I — I'd like it most awfully.'

'Would you, really?'

'Yes, of course.'

'All right, then. Which?'

'Oh, I say ——'

'Front or side?'

'Well . . .'

'Hurry up!'

He wanted them both, but he mustn't make a fool of himself. How about another glance at the original? He turned his head. She was looking at him. The eyes had it.

'I ——'

'What?'

Try swallowing. Start again.

'I think I'd like this one, if I may really have it?'

'All right. The straight-at-you one, you mean?'

Exactly. And right through you and out the other side, shattering and scattering your whole being on the way.

'I say, thanks most awfully. And' (another nervous laugh) — 'and I say ——'

''M?'

'Would you be a —— Would you mind awfully just sort of putting something on it?'

She hadn't quite understood.

'"Putting"? Putting what?'

'Writing, I mean. It would make it so much more — more —— Well, I mean, it would sort of ——'

'My name?'

'Yes! That's it. Here — take my pen.'

Not lightly nor thoughtlessly does the owner of a fountain-pen offer the use of his faithful toy. He knows well enough what even a few words by an alien hand can do to a nib which has been guaranteed by the makers for twenty years. But Miss Shirley — who had no fountain-pen of her own — probably missed the subtlety of the compliment as she shook a shower of drops over the packing-paper. On the other hand she wrote only one word, and that with only six letters.

'Sylvia.'

And she drew a line under it.

'Thanks most *tremendously*,' said Beaky.

And somehow or other he was walking away past the other houses in Dolphin Street, holding the photograph as though it were made of explosive glass; his head in the clouds; his feet anywhere that they chose to take him.

Eventually they took him back to his lodgings.

'Hullo,' said Snubs.

'Hullo,' said Beaky.

And as there was nothing else for it, he resumed his existence as a single young gentleman with a job in the City.

3

It wasn't until he had extracted his trophy from the top drawer of his dressing-table, and left it at the frame-maker's — a gross creature who had put his large thumb all over the vision of loveliness, and had insisted that it would take him the best part of a week to complete even so urgent and elementary a commission; it wasn't, in other words, until two or three days later that he began to exhaust a little of his gratitude, and wonder what implications might or might not be drawn from the single word of six letters.

It was during this interminable period, also, that he began to wonder if by any chance he could have secured either the photograph or the word of six letters without asking for them. If, for instance, he had controlled himself for just another five minutes, or had dropped a few hints, instead of blundering right into it like that . . .

But why dream of it? He hadn't controlled himself, and he had got what he wanted. What attractions did he possess that could lead a girl like Sylvia — who

must have hundreds of fellows wanting her photograph and signature, curse them! — to offer him a present, and such a present, that he had done nothing whatever to deserve? That he could never hope to do anything to deserve.

Back came the portrait from the frame-maker, and took its rightful position in the very centre of the bedroom mantelpiece; but gloom descended on Beaky Brett, and humility such as would have made him a very poor sort of companion for a worm. It was no good. She'd only done it because she was so kind, and because she hadn't wanted to hurt his feelings. The photograph had probably been meant for someone else really, so that she'd dislike him now whenever she thought of him.

Not that she ever could think of him, of course. Why should she?

The eyes on the mantelpiece gazed back again at the bashful Beaky, and as is the way of eyes in photographs seemed to become more and more remote and unreal. It was as if each time that he stared at them he dissipated some of the essence of Sylvia with which they had originally been charged. It faded away beneath his destructive glances. In the hope of recovering it, he was reduced to taking the picture by surprise; rushing suddenly into the bedroom and catching it off its guard; a method which, when used sparingly, could still restore some of its former virtue, but left him more unsatisfied every time that he employed it.

Not much January, February, or March about young Mr. Brett's behaviour just now. This was It.

But Snubs had no more musical parties up his sleeve, and one couldn't very well call at Dolphin Street for another week or two. Could one write, or

telephone? Not, apparently, when it came to posting the letter or lifting the receiver. All one could do, for the moment, was to come home from the office by a very roundabout route, and then — keeping a keen lookout for the butler — gaze hurriedly at a choice of windows and pass on again. Not much to look forward to, and still less to look back on; yet somehow it kept one going.

It did more than that.

'Hullo,' said a husky voice, just behind him. 'Is that you?'

Beaky spun round, snatched at his hat, and tried not to look as if he had just been caught picking somebody's pocket.

'By Jove!'

'How funny,' said Sylvia. 'I was just going to write to you.'

'I say! You weren't!'

'Yes; can you come to a frightful dinner-party here on Tuesday? Mummie told me to ask you.'

('Dash!' thought the insatiable Beaky. 'I'd have got a letter from her, if only I hadn't done this.')

'Yes, of course,' he said, aloud. 'Will you thank her most awfully?'

'Eight-fifteen?'

'I'll be there. Er ——'

'What?'

'Oh, rather! Absolutely, I mean.'

'Absolutely what?'

Was she laughing at him? It didn't matter. She could if she liked.

'I don't know,' he said incoherently. 'I must rush.'

'Don't forget, then. Tuesday.'

'Ah ——'

She was gone. Young Mr. Brett was left staring again at the familiar front door, and sniffing at the faintest suggestion of scent which seemed to vanish even as he sniffed. Idiot! Why on earth had he pretended that he was in such a hurry? Fool! Ass! Clumsy great goat!

Angel! Marvellous creature! Darling!

So April went on. He was amazed sometimes when he realized how often he was seeing her. He was tormented every time that they separated by the fear that he would never see her again. He gloated over the photograph. He went to and fro from his work. He dreamt, and prayed, and wondered. He said nothing to Snubs, though, at this stage; and Snubs said nothing to him.

If a cloud hung over the future of those furnished rooms in Wykeham Street, it was a cloud which had been inevitable from the moment that they had come there. Snubs looked at it philosophically, and asked no questions. He knew a great deal more than he had been told, but he was in no hurry to be told any more than he knew.

If, however, Miss Shirley were anything like her photograph, then his friend Beaky had his very best wishes.

CHAPTER THREE

Disadvantages of being grown-up — Mr. Cottenham's views on national economy — Fitzgibbon is rather awful — Perfect picnic at Green Hatches — Fitzgibbon is quite awful, and a Poet Laureate is avenged.

I

In spite of a continual feeling of expectation — strongest always when she woke up in the mornings, and diminishing as another unadventurous day slipped by — Noodles was beginning to wonder if being grown-up were quite all that she had imagined. Her freedom was, indeed, complete, for Mr. Cottenham never asked her where she was going or what she was doing, and would only have stopped listening if she had tried to tell him; but he didn't like anyone being invited to the house, and there didn't seem to be anyone particular to go and visit elsewhere. Another thing that he didn't like — as Noodles well knew — was to be asked for any of her allowance in advance. In fact, he made a face like an elderly baby on the point of tears whenever any form of expenditure was mentioned in his hearing. And at this time of year something called the Budget preyed on his mind to such an extent that he could be heard muttering imprecations in his study and shaking his newspaper in a frenzy of annoyance. 'Do they want to bleed us to death?' he would growl, in the most alarming manner. 'A pack of cheats, sir! A pack of thieves!'

On overhearing this characteristic outburst from the corridor outside, Noodles had put her head in at the door — overwhelmed by curiosity as to who could

have called on her guardian so soon after breakfast, or if it came to that at any time. But he was quite alone.

'I'm busy,' he said.

'I'm sorry,' said Noodles.

'Eight hundred million a year,' said Mr. Cottenham, waving the newspaper at her. 'Eight hundred and twenty million a year. Do they want to smash the whole system? They're mad! Where's it to come from?'

Noodles hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about.

'They're all in it together,' added Mr. Cottenham, making savage, jerky gestures. 'There isn't a man among them who'll face the facts. They don't care. "Pile it on," they say. "It'll last our time." But it won't!'

'No?' said Noodles sympathetically.

'Bah!' said Mr. Cottenham. 'What do you want?'

'Nothing,' said Noodles. 'I only ——'

'Some other time,' said Mr. Cottenham. 'I can't be disturbed before lunch. I've a lot to think about. I ——'

He dropped the newspaper, and pushed at the air.

'You don't understand,' he said fretfully. 'You don't remember Gladstone. If I'd got any sense, I'd sell this place and go and live abroad. How'd you like that, eh?'

'Which country?' asked Noodles.

'Bah!' said Mr. Cottenham again. 'They're all the same. They're all robbers and windbags. It doesn't matter what they call themselves. No, no; I'll stay where I am, thank you. But you'll remember what I said when it's too late and we're all ruined. Now run along and play.'

He pushed with both hands, and Noodles shut herself out. She was awfully sorry for Mr. Cottenham when he was upset like this, but he made it awfully difficult for one to say so when he never really explained what it was all about. Anyhow it was no good mentioning her allowance when he was in this sort of mood; and — as she couldn't help realizing — it was a subject which would only have put him into this sort of mood, if he hadn't been in it already. She was glad, on the whole, that they weren't going to live abroad, because Beaky couldn't possibly chuck up his job and come too, and because she'd never been the least use at any other language. Apart from these serious drawbacks, it might have been rather exciting. 'I mean,' said Noodles to herself, 'it would be a sort of change. One might see volcanoes and glaciers and things. One might even run across Aunt Caroline . . .'

Mr. Cottenham had told her to run along, and she ran along. He had also told her to play, and she did so. That is to say that having run as far as the stile at the bottom of the orchard, she sat on it and twanged the stringed-instrument — which was her almost inseparable companion out of doors, because Mr. Cottenham objected so very strongly to its use in the house on the ground that it went right through his head. For the same reason Noodles kept her gramophone in her bedroom and only played it with the window shut, so that on a fine day like this — and especially when one was sick of all one's old records, and knew that one had used all the needles at least ten times — it was much better to twang on the stringed-instrument at the bottom of the orchard.

As she twanged, she also sang little songs about how she was dismal and blue, or lonesome and sad, or pining

and yearning — not that she was any of these things at the moment, with the sun lighting up the orchard and warming the back of her spine, and with the upward roll becoming really rather satisfactory at last; but because sentiments of this nature predominated in the tunes of which she was fondest. The same feature might have been noticed in her stock of gramophone records, and if Beaky had only remembered to send that parcel from Wykeham Street there would have been still more musical misery when her bedroom window was safely shut. But one sang these songs very cheerfully, and they had no kind of effect on one's spirits. As one of the rare exceptions very accurately remarked, it was rhythm that was the thing.

So Noodles beat time with her right foot, which was attached to one of the two most graceful objects in Pippingfold — we should have said 'one of four' if Miss Shirley hadn't been in London — and was exceedingly rhythmic. And she sang very softly and twanged very brilliantly, and was punctilious in repeating any phrase where she had struck the wrong chord; and presently a large man with a little moustache and what his enemies might have called a red face came wandering up the field-path from below, and stopped, and took off his hat, and said: 'Good-morning, Miss Brett.'

'Hullo,' said Noodles. 'Do you want to come through?'

'No,' said the large man. 'I heard you playing. Didn't you see me coming?'

'Well,' said Noodles, who was a very truthful young woman; 'as a matter of fact, I did.'

'Jolly good,' said the large man, with a sort of sound like a laugh. And he leant against the other end of the

stile, and put one foot — which was attached to a leg in a gaiter, but a real leather one this time — on the lower step. And he breathed rather more loudly than Noodles really cared about, only she knew she oughtn't to be so critical and particular.

'You look all right,' he added.

'Do I?' said Noodles, rather wishing that she could return the compliment.

'Topping,' said the large man. 'I say, did you think I'd be along this morning. Eh?'

'Well, yes,' said Noodles.

She would have liked, in a way, to explain that, although she had even rather hoped that he'd be along this morning, this was only because it was so dull never seeing anybody. But if she were truthful, she was also polite.

'Well, yes,' she said. 'I thought you might sort of roll up.'

'Jolly good,' said the large man, again. 'I saw you from the lane down there. Eh?'

'Did you?'

'Rather. But I was looking out for you, you know.'

'Were you?'

'Yes. I hoped you'd be here.'

('This is a jolly stupid sort of conversation,' said Noodles to herself. 'He was much more amusing than this last time. I know — I'll ask what happened in that race he was talking about.')

'I say — Mr. Fitzgibbon — did that horse win yesterday?'

'Eh?' said Mr. Fitzgibbon. 'Which one?'

'The one with the funny name. You know — the one you said was going to put you straight.'

'It didn't,' said Mr. Fitzgibbon. 'The brute wasn't even placed.'

'Oh, I am sorry! But — but perhaps it wasn't its fault.'

'Eh?' said Mr. Fitzgibbon, in an odd sort of way. In the circles in which he usually moved, one always called a horse a brute when it failed to put one straight, and he thought Noodles's look of sympathy was all for himself. 'Don't you worry,' he said. 'Luck's bound to change.'

'Do you think so? I do hope it will.'

'Look at the way I've met you, I mean.'

Noodles couldn't trace the connection here.

'Me?' she said. 'What have I got to do with it?'

Mr. Fitzgibbon looked at her in an odder way than ever.

'A fellow gets infernally lonely, all by himself,' he said. 'You don't know what it's like. If only I'd been brought up differently, I don't suppose I'd be knocking about like this. But I never could stand office-work.'

'Nor could I,' said Noodles. 'I think it sounds awful.'

'I've got to be in the open,' said Mr. Fitzgibbon. 'My young brother's the lucky one, you know. He's in the navy. That's where I ought to have been, only they never give me the chance. Got a wife and family, too.'

'Your brother, you mean?'

'Yes — lucky devil. I say — won't you play us something?'

'I'd rather not,' said Noodles. 'I'd rather hear some more of your adventures, really. What are you trying to do now?'

Mr. Fitzgibbon looked a little startled.

'Oh!' he said. 'What am I trying to do now? Well, I told you, I thought. I'm waiting to hear from my lawyer.'

'About your estates in Ireland, you mean?'

Mr. Fitzgibbon half-closed his eyes.

'Yes,' he said. 'If I had my rights, Miss Brett, I'd be a rich man. But you don't know what the Irish are like. They're hopeless.'

'They are, aren't they?'

'You've said it. They're the scum of the earth.'

'But aren't you Irish too?'

'Here, I say — are you making fun of me?'

'Oh, no! Of course not, Mr. Fitzgibbon; I was only ——'

'Here, I say — don't call me "Mr. Fitzgibbon" like that. I wish you wouldn't.'

'Why not?'

'Because we're friends, aren't we?'

'Yes, of course. But what *am* I to call you, then?'

'Anything you like,' said Mr. Fitzgibbon. 'Why not ——'

'I know,' interrupted Noodles. 'I shall call you "Fitz." How's that?'

Fitz looked a little disappointed.

'All right,' he said. 'A lot of my pals call me that. And what shall I call you?'

'Me?'

'Yes.'

Noodles didn't see why these questions need have been raised at all, but if he wanted to call her anything, then she supposed he'd better call her 'Noodles.' She put forward this suggestion.

'Here, I say,' said Fitz. 'Are you pulling my leg?'

'No, of course not. Everybody calls me that. It's a name — well, my brother invented it really, when I used to be rather stupid.'

'Topping,' said Fitz. 'Noodles. Jolly good.'

('Bother,' said Noodles to herself. 'Why can't he just go on talking like he did yesterday? I hate people laughing at my name who don't understand. But he's had awfully bad luck over that horse and his lawyer and everything, and he did come up here specially to see me. I mustn't be unkind about him.')

So she wasn't unkind about him, or to him, and if she had been — though Mr. Fitzgibbon didn't know this — she wouldn't have been Noodles Brett. And he began smoking cigarettes out of a paper packet and telling her more about horses and lawyers and his bad luck. And she listened dreamily and agreed with everything that he said. And once she played him a little tune on the stringed-instrument, but she wouldn't sing in case he laughed at her again like that. And presently she felt sure it must be nearly lunch-time, and she explained how sorry she was that she couldn't ask him back to the house with her, but Mr. Cottenham didn't like being disturbed.

He was awfully nice about that, and said that perhaps he could call there one day, then.

'Well,' said Noodles frankly, 'I don't know that you could. You see, Mr. Cottenham never really wants to see anybody. It's the way he's made.'

Mr. Fitzgibbon was suddenly taken very honourable, and said that he didn't want to do anything behind Mr. Cottenham's back.

'Do what?' said Noodles. 'What do you mean?'

Mr. Fitzgibbon laughed, and crumpled up his empty cigarette-packet and threw it into the hedge, and took off his hat and said he must be getting back to the inn. But you never knew, he said; he might be coming up this way again.

'Oh, do,' said Noodles. 'I'm always hanging about somewhere.'

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'Jolly good,' said Mr. Fitzgibbon; and went marching away through the thick grass.

'He's rather awful, really,' said Noodles to herself. 'Poor dear. But it must be horrid staying at the Blue Boar because one's lawyer won't send one any money. Rather horrid anyhow, if fact, if one's used to being comfortable. You know, I don't think Beaky'd like him at all, somehow; but then men are so awfully particular about each other always. And I'm sure he means to be nice.'

On the evidence before us at this stage, we are inclined to agree with her. And yet we don't really like Mr. Fitzgibbon, either.

2

Noodles was bowling along on the parlourmaid's bicycle — not going anywhere definite, but just having a little practice, and keeping away from the various places where Mr. Fitzgibbon had found her 'hanging about' since that second meeting at the bottom of the orchard — when she heard a low grunt from beyond the next turning in the winding lane.

'A car,' she said to herself. 'Bother! Which side shall I go?'

The bicycle settled the matter for her by charging the off-side bank. She tried to dismount, found the conditions unfavourable, shut her eyes, rang her bell, and came to rest quite comfortably like a bas-relief against the grassy slope. 'I'd better stay like this,' she decided, 'till it's gone by. I hope they won't think I've had an accident.'

But the car stopped also.

'Yes, it is,' said a voice. 'Hullo, Noodles!'

Noodles blinked in the bright sunlight.

'Hullo,' she said. 'Who —— Oh, it's Sylvia. Hullo!'

'It's Noodles Brett, Mummie,' said the voice. 'Wait a second, Carter. I say, what are you doing?'

'Me?' said Noodles. 'Nothing. How do you do, Mrs. Shirley?'

Mrs. Shirley looked very calm, and rocked slightly on the upholstery of the big car. Noodles gave a sort of hop, and detached herself from the bank.

'I say,' she said; 'I thought you were in London.'

'We are,' said Sylvia.

'Oh, how sickening!' said Noodles.

'We've just come down to have a row with the architect,' said Sylvia. 'Why don't you come and have some lunch?'

'Oh!' said Noodles. 'But I say, have you got any?'

'Loads,' said Sylvia. 'We're going to have a picnic.'

A curious word, that. Its mere utterance rouses half the population, irrespective of age or sex, to a wild state of excitement which no amount of disillusioning experience can check. The other half remain completely unmoved and regard the first half as more or less mad. As for Noodles, she gave a loud scream of joy, tripped over the parlourmaid's bicycle again, and fetched up with her head through the open window of the car.

'Oh, Mrs. Shirley — would you really mind if I came too? I'm awfully untidy, I'm afraid, but I do adore picnics. Oh, may I really?'

Mrs. Shirley smiled the lazy smile which so ill reflected her existence of almost perpetual motion, and let her daughter answer for her.

'Of course!' said Sylvia. 'Jump in.'

'I can't,' said Noodles. 'I've got this awful bicycle with me. But I'll come wobbling after you.'

'All right,' said Sylvia. 'Not too fast, Carter.'

The car grunted again and set off, and Noodles wobbled after it. Once she wobbled alongside and shouted in at the window.

'I say — did you know I've left school?'

'Yes,' cried Sylvia. 'Don't come so close, for Heaven's sake.'

'What? Oh, all right.'

So they reached the entrance of Green Hatches, and drove and wobbled up the drive. 'This is frightful fun,' said Noodles to herself. 'This is far better than going nowhere, or listening to Fitzgibbon. I hope he won't be annoyed if he doesn't find me this morning, but really it can't do him any harm for a change. And, besides, he's been getting so awfully gloomy lately. I do wish the Shirleys would stay here a bit, and we could have some more tennis.'

But Green Hatches looked absolutely uninhabitable. Fragments of the roof were off, windows were out, bricks and sand-heaps were scattered round the front door, wheelbarrows and ladders were all over the place. Invisible workmen were hammering and chipping and whistling.

'Come on up to my room,' said Sylvia. 'I want to get some things, and Mummie'll take hours. She always does. Hullo, Mr. Everett!'

The architect, one supposed. Guilt was written on his features, and Noodles felt quite sorry for him; only it seemed difficult to imagine Mrs. Shirley being really angry with anyone. He smiled at Sylvia, though, and said it was a fine day.

'Divine!' said Sylvia. 'Come on, Noodles.'

'Well,' said Mrs. Shirley; 'that is a fine mess you've made.'

'Oh, we're getting on splendidly,' said Mr. Everett, sounding rather like a doctor. 'Mind that bucket, Mrs. Shirley. Now, I'll just show you . . .'

Their voices faded away in a fresh outburst of violent chipping and hammering, and Noodles followed Miss Shirley up the stairs. They stepped over a pile of carpet on the first landing, edged past a hanging dust-sheet, and suddenly the house was just as it had been at Christmas.

'I wouldn't let them touch my part,' said Sylvia. 'And even as it is, we'll be lucky if we're in by Whitsun. This way.'

'I adore this room,' said Noodles.

'So do I.'

'I say, do you think you'll really be here for Whitsun?'

'Well, I hope so.'

'So do I. I say, how did you know I'd left school?'

Miss Shirley pulled off her hat, and flung it at an armchair.

'Beaky told me,' she said.

Noodles screamed.

'Oh, I say! Have you been seeing Beaky? Oh, what fun! Where did it happen?'

'Oh, here and there,' said Sylvia.

'He is a beast,' said Noodles. 'He never told me. Did you see Snubs?'

'Who?'

'Snubs Tipton. Beaky's friend that he lives with. He's awfully sort of quiet, but he's awfully nice. His father's governor of some funny little island. I never can remember its name. Snubs and Beaky were at Oxford together.'

'Oh,' said Sylvia. 'No, I haven't met him yet.'

'Oh,' said Noodles. 'Did Beaky say anything about me?'

'Yes, he said you'd left school.'

'I know. But he didn't say anything about any gramophone records, did he?'

'I don't think so.'

'Well, it doesn't matter. I expect he's been working awfully hard.'

'He does work hard, doesn't he?'

'They jolly well make him,' said Noodles.

'Frightful,' said Sylvia.

'Oh, ghastly. I say, do you think I know you well enough to tell you something disgustingly rude?'

Miss Shirley looked almost as guilty as Mr. Everett.

'What?' she stammered.

'I adore that little frock of yours.'

'Oh!' said Miss Shirley, beginning to laugh. 'Do you really? I thought —— I say, what are you doing now you've left school?'

'Nothing,' said Noodles. 'Mr. Cottenham doesn't seem to notice I've left. But perhaps he will after the holidays are over. Of course he's been awfully busy.'

'What about?'

'Well, I don't know, really. But he hates being disturbed, and after all it's not as if I was his daughter. And of course I'd hate it if he put me into an office like Beaky. I say, Sylvia . . .'

'Yes?'

'How do you suppose I could find out about somebody's will?'

Miss Shirley turned round from where she had been rummaging in a drawer.

'Will?' said the husky voice. 'And testament, do you mean?'

'Yes; that's it.'

'But find out what? Whose will?'

'Well,' said Noodles, scowling horribly; 'Daddy's, I meant.'

Miss Brett always scowled horribly whenever she mentioned either of her dead parents, and was rather apt to growl as well. This was to show that she was making no claim on anyone's sympathy, and was a sort of warning that they had better not look as if they felt sorry for her, and was altogether very alarming to people who couldn't interpret such curiously misleading signals. Even Miss Mulberry was under the impression that Noodles bore some grudge against the authors of her being, which was very far from the case. But Sylvia just felt uncomfortable, and understood. For Sylvia, also, became huskier than ever when any reference was made to the late Mr. Shirley.

'Oh,' she said. 'I see. But didn't they tell you about it?'

'Well, they did,' said Noodles, 'but I wasn't listening. You see, I was only about ten, and it didn't seem to matter particularly. And — well, I was just wondering.'

'Couldn't your guardian tell you?'

'Oh, I couldn't possibly ask him. He hates being bothered about anything like that.'

'Still, he ought to know. Oughtn't he?'

'Oh, of course he knows. I mean, that's why he *is* my guardian — and Beaky's — because it was all in Daddy's will. But someone else said something about it, and it made me wonder if I couldn't find out. It was a man I've been talking to. I wonder if you've ever heard of him?'

'What's he called?'

'Fitzgibbon,' said Noodles. 'He's not bad, really. Do you know him?'

Sylvia shook her head.

'But what's it all got to do with him?' she asked.

'Nothing,' said Noodles. 'I suppose he wondered why I'd got a guardian, and all that.' She scowled again, and dismissed the whole subject. 'I'm not really worrying about it,' she said, 'and, besides, I could always ask Beaky. I say — I'm awfully glad you've been seeing him. Don't you adore him?'

'There's Mummie,' said Miss Shirley. She ran to the window, and put her head out. 'All right, darling! Just coming!'

It was an indoor picnic, after all, and they didn't even sit on the floor as Noodles had half-hoped. But no hard-boiled eggs or slices of stale cake or tepid water out of a bottle that smelt of vinegar, or any of the conventional makeshifts and drawbacks. No wasps, either, and hardly any flies to speak of. 'This is marvellous,' said Noodles to herself. 'I must say, they do understand about food. It seems an awful pity that I can't ever ask them back again, but they ought to know that by now.'

She still felt a little shy of Mrs. Shirley, whose London clothes were rather overpowering — though again quite marvellous; but Mr. Everett, with whom a reconciliation seemed to have been effected, was awfully good at talking, and after lunch did a terribly good trick with two tumblers, and was very witty about a lot of people that Noodles had never heard of. And though they also talked about plays that she hadn't seen, and books that she hadn't read, they never did it in a way that made her feel out of it. And Mr. Everett said he'd never have guessed that she'd only just left

school, but that he was jolly glad that she had, which was awfully nice of him. In fact, he'd really have been almost perfect if he hadn't had little side-whiskers that looked as though they were a mistake.

'Now for the garden,' said Mrs. Shirley, when it was all over. And Sylvia made the sort of face with her mouth at Noodles which Beaky had found so fascinating. 'We can do better than that,' it implied this time, and Mrs. Shirley went off with Mr. Everett and poked at things with her parasol, but the younger generation went off to Sylvia's sitting-room and discovered a tin of peppermints, and talked each other's heads off.

'This,' said Noodles to herself, 'is much more what I mean by being grown-up. This is the nicest day that I've had since Christmas. This is just absolutely what I like.'

But there was a fanfare on the horn of the big car, and Sylvia had to run off and put her head out of the window again.

'All right, darling! Just coming!'

'Bother,' said Noodles to herself. 'Now it's the end.'

She helped Miss Shirley to shovel the clothes that she had been collecting into a suitcase, and helped her to carry it downstairs, and said good-bye to Mrs. Shirley and stood on one leg and thanked her enormously.

Mrs. Shirley smiled vaguely, and didn't seem to hear.

'Is everything there, Carter?' she said.

'Yes, 'm.'

'Sylvia?'

'Here I am, darling.'

Mr. Everett had vanished. The big car throbbed, and grunted, and rolled away down the drive. Noodles

picked up the parlourmaid's bicycle, and wheeled it to where the workmen could no longer see her, and hopped and staggered and landed more or less in the saddle, and wobbled off down the winding lane, and up the hill, and home.

'Thanks awfully, Mary,' she called out, as she passed the pantry window. 'I haven't hurt it a bit.'

'Oh, Miss Ursula!'

'Hullo?'

'Mr. Cottenham was asking for you, miss. I think he's in the study.'

'Oh, bother! All right.'

Mr. Cottenham was walking up and down, and flapping his hands together behind his back.

'Oh!' he said, pausing suddenly. 'So you're back?'

Noodles wondered what the Budget had done now.

'Yes,' she said. 'But I've only ——'

'Look here,' said Mr. Cottenham. 'This has got to stop.'

'But ——'

'You know quite well what I mean,' said Mr. Cottenham. 'I'm very busy. I'm not at all well. I know exactly where you've been, and I won't have it.'

Having thus made four misstatements and one ridiculous threat, he pulled the face which we have previously described as resembling that of an elderly baby on the brink of tears. Noodles could no more help feeling sorry for him than she could imagine how he had found out where she had been.

'If this goes on,' said Mr. Cottenham, 'I shall know what to do. I'm responsible for you. Your father was my oldest friend.'

Noodles scowled horribly, and left the room. She never even heard Mr. Cottenham calling out to her to

shut the door. She never heard or saw anything until ——

'Hullo, Noodles,' said a voice that she seemed to recognize.

To her surprise, she found that she had come as far as the bottom of the orchard, and there was Mr. Fitzgibbon climbing over the stile.

'I thought I saw you,' he said. And then: 'Why, what's the matter? You've been ——'

'No, I haven't,' said Noodles fiercely. 'Oh, go away!'

'Here!' said Mr. Fitzgibbon, and he jumped down and caught hold of her arm.

'What?' said Noodles. She wondered what was happening now, but it didn't seem to matter particularly.

Mr. Fitzgibbon looked very large and near.

'Oh, all right,' she heard herself muttering, in a distant, tired, foggy sort of way.

And we are very sorry to say that Mr. Fitzgibbon kissed her.

3

As soon as this regrettable incident had taken place, Miss Brett said something which sounded rather like 'Oh, bother!' and turned round, and ran back to the house, and ran upstairs, and ran into her shabby bedroom, and shut the door, and went and stared at herself in her looking-glass, and rubbed her cheek very hard with her handkerchief, and scowled more horribly than ever, and began to laugh and said 'Damn!' and sat down on her bed, and felt most frightfully wicked.

'Disgusting,' she added, presently. 'Horrible. Loathsome.'

She rubbed her cheek again, and stared at a crack in the wallpaper.

'Sickening little fool,' she went on, obviously referring to herself, for nobody could have called Mr. Fitzgibbon little. 'Worm! Rotten little horror!'

She continued to explode with similar epithets at intervals of a few seconds until the supply began to run out; after which she got up again, closed the window, put on a gramophone record of a fox-trot, listened to about a third of it without any enthusiasm, and suddenly stopped it.

'That's no good,' she announced, and she opened the window again. And having opened it, she wondered what everybody would say if she fell out of it and was killed. She was annoyed to find that these speculations were making her feel rather interesting once more, which she had just sworn that she would never feel again as long as she lived.

'It just shows you how awful I am,' she said. 'I dare say Fitzgibbon's frightened out of his wits. I dare say —— Oh, bother! There I go again. I wish I'd got somebody else to think about.'

She tried to think about the Shirleys, and recoiled in horror at the way in which — so it suddenly seemed — she had let them down and disgraced them.

'I wonder,' she reflected, 'if I'd feel better if I did something tiresome. Like washing my hair.' But that meant going and asking for another towel, and certainly the very first part of her penance must be self-effacement and not troubling the servants or anyone else. Besides, it was nearly tea-time, and another part of the penance was not to try and hide from Mr. Cottenham.

'The only thing,' said Noodles to herself, 'is to be very careful and good for the rest of my life, and to do a lot more things that I don't want to do, and never

to do anything suddenly again, and — well, I suppose so — never to speak to anybody unless I know them awfully well. Only,' she added — and here we detect that strange streak of common-sense which never entirely deserted her — 'of course one has to answer them when they speak to one first.'

She actually smiled, as she recalled an earlier and less discreditable adventure in her career as a grown-up person.

'I wish it had been Fitzgibbon,' she said, 'that I'd hit with my hockey-stick. By accident, I mean, of course — like in the train. And — well, not so as to *really* hurt him.'

We tremble at this ineradicable kindness, but equally we welcome that smile. The split infinitive has hardly troubled us at all, whatever its effect might have been on Miss Mulberry. Noodles is still feeling far from virtuous, and puritans may be assured that she will be visited with recurrent pangs for a considerable time to come; but it is a great relief to us that she has not so far wept. It upset us horribly when she wept in Miss Mulberry's study, but now we come to think of it that was for a very different reason. If Mr. Fitzgibbon had tried giving her a volume of Lord Tennyson's poetry instead of what he actually did try —— Well, perhaps you see what we mean.

Though, on the other hand, perhaps you don't.

In either case, Noodles came downstairs at half-past four, and though the drawing-room was quite empty she made no attempt to hurry over her tea, but waited patiently until Mary came in to say that Mr. Cottenham had gone out for a walk. And at dinner he was just the same as usual; that is to say, amazingly poor company. And after dinner he went back to his

study, and Noodles performed some more penance by reading ten pages of a dull book that she couldn't understand. And then came bed, where the feeling of wickedness became much more troublesome again, and some more epithets might have been heard at intervals in the dark. And then at last came sleep, and no dreams either, but eight hours of complete rest for the conscience and everything else.

When she woke up again, the streak of common-sense was the first thing to greet her. 'After all,' it said, 'you're very much the same sort of Noodles that you were this time yesterday; and if anything you're more sensible, because now you know you're not going to see Fitzgibbon again. And, after all, you didn't really know he was going to do that, and it isn't as if you didn't hate it just as much at the time as afterwards. Just remember,' it said, 'that it wasn't anything except a silly sort of accident, and you won't do so badly.'

'Right,' said Noodles, and she got up, and had a bath, and dressed, and came down to breakfast. And Mr. Cottenham was still quite normal again, and the Budget must have been rather better this morning, because he read his newspaper without once snorting or rattling his cup or muttering about packs of thieves. Presently he paddled off to his study and shut himself in, and Mary came along to clear away and said that there were some new kittens in the gardener's cottage, and Noodles rushed off to see them at once, and really had the most perfect time with the whole family, who quite entered into the spirit of the many simple though ingenious games that she played with them. Even the mother set aside her heavy responsibilities for the time being, and was kind enough to pretend that Noodles was a mouse.

'Thanks *awfully*, Mrs. Crabbett. Thanks most *tremendously*. And you will try and find nice homes for them, won't you?'

'Well, miss ——'

'Oh, but of course you will. And I'll help you. I'm almost sure they'd take one over at Green Hatches, if you could wait just a little bit. I'll ask them. In fact, I'll ask everybody I meet.'

Mrs. Crabbett smiled, and the kittens squeaked, and the cat rumbled, and Noodles laughed and ran up towards the house. And then she stopped suddenly, turned round, dashed back through the kitchen-garden door, and slammed it violently.

'Oh, Lord!' she said.

For Fitzgibbon, whom she had so recently decided that she would never see again, had gone by within three yards of her — heading steadily and unmistakably for the front door.

'Oh, bother!' she said. 'I do hope he won't wait.'

But it seemed more than likely that he would. In another minute, so Noodles supposed, the voice of Mary would be heard calling for her; and then what should she do? Run away? Yes, but what if Fitzgibbon went on waiting? She couldn't possibly be late for lunch again after what had happened yesterday. What about dodging in at the back, and hiding upstairs. No; better stay where she was for the moment. No good walking into the trap until one knew what Mary was doing.

She stayed where she was, on tiptoe, hardly breathing. A bee came buzzing past her, and she made a face at it, beseeching it to be quiet. It buzzed off. Dead silence. Was it possible that Fitzgibbon had given it up, and gone away? With infinite caution she un-

latched the green door, opened it about six inches, and peered through the crack. The drive was deserted. The house showed no sign of life. She turned round, and saw Mr. Crabbett leaning on a spade and gazing at her. Bother! If anyone came and looked for her now, of course he'd tell them where she'd been; and he was far too deaf and stupid to be taken into one's confidence. She'd better try and work her way round to the back door, after all.

She went right past Mr. Crabbett's cottage again, and over the fence, and up the cart-track, and through the gap by the wood-shed, and along by the other outbuildings, and — alternately hurrying and standing stock-still — reached the pantry window. Mary was visible through it, and audible also — polishing a toast-rack and singing to herself.

'I say! I say — Mary!'

'Oh, Miss Ursula! What a start you gave me!'

'I'm awfully sorry. I say . . .'

'Yes, miss?'

'Was — was anybody looking for me?'

'No, miss. There's a gentleman in with Mr. Cottenham.'

'What!'

But Noodles had heard all right. Fitzgibbon, for some horrible and inexplicable reason, was going to sneak. Was sneaking at this very moment. Had probably sneaked, in fact, by now.

'D-didn't he ask for me, Mary?'

'No, miss. Why, do you know the gentleman, miss?'

'It doesn't matter,' said Noodles thickly; vanished from the window; tottered aimlessly across the yard; lost consciousness, or at any rate all memory of the next five minutes, and came to herself behind a laurel-

bush round at the front of the house again. 'Oh, I do feel so awful,' she groaned. 'Oh, what *can* he be saying all this time? Oh, what *is* going to happen?'

The bee, or another bee, came back. But it could buzz itself silly this time. Noodles didn't care.

Footsteps on the drive. Miss Brett put her head round the laurel-bush, and drew it back quickly. It was Fitzgibbon going away. The further he went, the nearer, of necessity, she approached the house; for the laurel-bush must always be between them. Something suddenly made her look over her shoulder. Mr. Cottenham was standing on the front doorstep.

'Come here!' he called out. 'I want to speak to you.'

'What?' said Noodles desperately.

Mr. Cottenham disappeared into the blackness, without troubling to repeat his summons, and Noodles followed him. The hall was empty, but she could feel something dragging her towards the study; and there, of course, he was. He was bouncing up and down on the hearthrug, and flapping his hands together behind his back.

'Look here,' he said. 'I'm going to put a stop to this.'

'To what?' said Noodles, faintly.

'I warned you yesterday,' said Mr. Cottenham. 'You heard me, didn't you?'

Noodles couldn't make head or tail of this, but there was only one thing to do. She nodded.

'Ah,' said Mr. Cottenham. 'Very well, then. We'll hear no more of it. Do you understand?'

'No,' said Noodles, truthful in the last ditch.

'What?' snapped Mr. Cottenham. 'Please don't be impertinent, Ursula. You know perfectly well what I'm talking about.'

'I don't,' said Noodles obstinately.

'You do,' said Mr. Cottenham. 'This ridiculous idea of an engagement. I ——'

'*What!*'

They stared at each other. Mr. Cottenham checked for the moment by that explosive monosyllable, and Noodles so choking with astonishment and indignation that she was quite unable to add to it.

'But — but — but ——' she gasped.

'That'll do,' said Mr. Cottenham. 'You see, I know all about it.'

'But — but ——'

'And I've quite decided what to do. I shall telegraph to Miss Mulberry at once.'

'But ——'

'You'll go back to St. Ethelburga's to-morrow.'

'Yes, but ——'

'And what your father and mother would have thought ——'

'Oh — please!'

'I say, what your father ——'

Noodles scowled more horribly than she had ever scowled in her life.

'But it's not true!' she shouted. 'Mr. Cottenham, it's not ——'

Mr. Cottenham put his hands over his ears, turned his back, and leant on the mantelpiece in an attitude of supreme physical suffering.

'I'm sorry,' said Noodles abjectly. 'I'd forgotten about your nerves.'

Mr. Cottenham writhed silently; put out one hand behind him, and pointed backwards at the door.

'Oh, please say I haven't given you a headache! Oh, do please ——'

The hand waggled impatiently, and Noodles ceased to struggle against fate. It is a fact that as she drew out of Pippingfold Station by the early train on the following morning, she had practically forgiven every body but herself. 'If only I hadn't lost my Going-Away Prize,' she was murmuring reflectively, 'I don't suppose any of these awful things would have happened. I ought to have seen how unlucky that was bound to be at the time.'

But there seemed very little likelihood that Miss Mulberry would ever offer her another one.

CHAPTER FOUR

Peculiar properties of window-seats — Their effect on Beaky Brett — A terribly important letter — What the writer didn't know — And what he didn't expect.

I

THE big houses in Wykeham Street have become more and more medical of recent years, and Number Ninety-Seven provided an exception to this general development only in so far as it harboured dentists rather than doctors. Chance had established Mr. Rumbold and his partner on the ground floor, Mr. Titherington and his partner on the first floor, and Mr. Elmsleigh and his partner on the second floor — all skilled members of their invaluable calling and gentlemen with the most powerful wrists. But higher than this — as elsewhere in Wykeham Street — it would appear that no amount of agony could prevail on any sufferer to climb. The third floor, accordingly, had been let in the shape of partially furnished lodgings, and had been occupied for some time by Messrs. R. H. Brett and W. G. Tipton in their private capacity as sleepers and consumers of breakfast and dinner; while the top storey of all, like the vast basement which had once prepared huge joints for a family that had actually filled the whole building, was the province of the three Burgesses. Of Mr. Burgess, that is to say, the ex-butler who answered the front-door bell and valeted the third-floor tenants; of Mrs. Burgess, who cooked the aforesaid breakfasts and dinners, and also acted as housemaid; and of Gladys Burgess, their daughter, who never really seemed to do anything, except to

look very plain at all times, and to blush whenever she met either of the resident bachelors on the stairs.

A gloomy house, then, in some ways, with terrified patients sprinkled all over it during the daytime, and large, empty rooms dreaming of their vanished domesticity at night. With palms and bronzes and oil-paintings and fragments of armour scattered about the gaunt waiting-room, and a lingering scent of antiseptics and anæsthetics scattered everywhere else. With glimpses through half-open doors of grim figures in white jackets, of the most sinister-looking machinery, or — more sinister still — of chairs with head-rests and leg-rests, with multitudinous levers and ratchets; the actual altars on which the victims of civilization trembled beneath the weapons of their priests. Yet a house with traces of dignity in its massive proportions and the sweep of its spacious stairs. And a house that suddenly became almost cosy and comfortable, as these same stairs shrank on their leap to the third floor. In days gone by this furnished sitting-room would probably have been the nursery, and though the mind reeled at the thought of carrying children and trays and bath-cans to such a height, there was yet an atmosphere of serenity, once you had got there, which was conspicuously absent in the waiting-room or the torture-chambers below.

But the feature which had first attracted Mr. Tipton and his fellow-lodger, the feature which still reconciled them to any other disadvantages in their quarters, was undoubtedly the presence of those two broad window-seats beneath those two square windows. And there were very few warm evenings on which their contiguous countenances did not brood over Wykeham Street from one or other of these apertures, while their elbows

anchored them to the sill, their knees rested on the squab-cushion beneath it, and the smoke from their two pipes ascended to join the rest of the cloud which hangs for ever over the smoky city of London.

Here, in silent companionship, they would gaze at the traffic below; at taxis rushing to and fro, or cruising in search of prey; at private cars purring or spluttering, as they swept through the long ravine; at pedestrians hurrying or sauntering on their mysterious affairs; at policemen conscientiously idling past the area railings; at lovers linked in obstructive catalepsy; at postmen rapping their way into the distant perspective; in short, at all the manifestations of civic life which may be observed from an upper window in Wykeham Street after the busiest part of the day is over, and before the fading twilight has altogether gone. Thus did they calm their youthful souls after the toiling and telephoning in their respective offices. Thus did they meditate on human existence, with particular reference to whatever problems it might be offering them at the moment. Thus did they work their way through the quarter-pound tins of Baffy's Mixture which were dotted all over the room behind them. And thus — not least important — did they avoid the indescribably tedious conversation of Mr. Burgess, as he cleared away the remains of their evening meal.

There was tradition, also, behind this window-seat business, dating back to other windows in the city of Oxford, where the two companions had also knelt, and smoked, and ruminated; windows looking over green quadrangles, where the foreshortened passage of strangers and acquaintances did so much to keep the trickle of dialogue going; and another window, in their joint digs in the same damp city, from which the sphere

of philosophic observation had been considerably enlarged by the addition of vehicular traffic. In this particular situation and attitude it seemed, somehow, unnecessary to finish sentences that one had begun, or to explain references which had become merged in the lighting of a match. A grunt, a few incoherent mumblings, and yet another valuable idea had been shared with the fellow-creature who knelt by your side. Even the rail of a liner, and the hypnotic backwash of the ocean itself, can hardly effect a closer communion of spirit than a window-seat at the right height from the ground, and the changeless variety of the panorama below. As a stimulus to thought it may well challenge comparison with the countryman's five-barred gate.

And so, as April passed into May and the evenings became longer and warmer, the snatches of intercourse on the window-seat at Number Ninety-Seven showed an increasing tendency to flicker round the subject which Mr. Brett could never wholly dislodge from his mind. It was understood, of course, that no fellow with any decency would mention definite names, and still less would he employ the monosyllable which describes the tenderest and most insupportable of passions. One must also reserve the right to abandon the subject without notice, and to return to it without explanation or warning. Yet even so, when hitched over a window-sill like this, and with one's pipe in one's mouth — so that one need never look at one's companion and could mumble as much as one chose; even so, one could convey a pretty accurate notion of the canker which was at work on one's vitals.

And there was this to be said for old Snubs; that he was the last kind of person to worry one with damn-fool questions, or to hustle one, or to go back to the

great subject without being given a lead. He listened, he smoked, and sometimes he grunted. But he never smiled, or alternatively appeared to lose interest if one preferred to linger on the edge of the great subject, or approached it by the most distant and devious routes. One might begin, for instance, and often did begin, by some vague reference to the high cost of living. Would Snubs give it as his opinion that two people could keep going better on a small income when they were sharing it than when they weren't?

'No doubt of it,' Snubs would say, without loosening the grip on his pipe. 'Look at us.'

''S a matter of fact,' Beaky would mumble, 'I was thinking of married people. But that would be just the same, wouldn't you say?'

Snubs had no doubt of this, either.

How little did Snubs suppose that one could start on; like that?

Snubs stared at a boy on a bicycle, and said that it all depended.

Beaky admitted this. But a little later he wanted to know what Snubs would do if, just for the sake of argument, he — that is to say the mumbler — got married himself.

Snubs, smoking stolidly, supposed that he'd have to buy a new top-hat.

Oh, quite. But would he be surprised, though?

Not particularly. He didn't go in for being surprised.

Well, here was a rather interesting sort of case. Supposing a fellow thought he might be raking in a bit more screw from his office later on — every chance of it, and all that — ought he to wait until he was before he said anything?

Said anything to whom?

Said anything to the girl, of course.

Snubs, still smoking, thought not. Snubs thought that girls didn't thank you if you kept them hanging about for ever. In Snubs's view, once a fellow managed to get accepted, almost anything might happen. Nobody liked having an engaged daughter about the house, or a daughter — it came to the same thing — who said she was engaged. They moped.

An odd look of fearful pride spread over Beaky's features in the twilight, as he pictured Sylvia moping for his sake. But they were still a long way from such a romantic possibility, and with a jerk of his shoulders he put forward what he described as another rather interesting sort of case. Supposing a fellow's father had died or been killed or something, and another sort of old boy had become the fellow's kind of trustee. Sat on his cash, and so forth. Was that more or less clear?

Absolutely. The clarity, though Snubs didn't say so, was considerably increased by the fact or coincidence that this was exactly his friend's situation. So he nodded, and the friend went trickling on.

This, it appeared, was the sort of point that he was driving at, if Snubs saw what he meant. Supposing this old boy had got to hand over some of the cash when the fellow got married, but only if he approved of the fellow's choice — well, what ought the fellow to do then? At which end ought he to start? By telling the old boy that he was going to marry a girl who might then go and turn him down, and probably would, in fact; or by having it out with her first, and then finding that the old boy had put his hoof down? In the latter event, in the sort of case that he was

thinking of, the fellow might have to go on being engaged for years, which everybody said was Hell. In the former event he would look, feel and altogether be such a dashed fool. Rather awkward, wasn't it?

Snubs agreed. But why, he asked, after several thoughtful puffs, why *should* the old boy put his hoof down?

'Because,' said Beaky, to Wykeham Street as a whole, 'in the sort of case I'm thinking of, he's just the kind of old boy who would. I dare say he doesn't mean to be like that, but there's no getting away from it. He hates listening to anybody, and he loathes making up his mind. All he wants is not to be worried about anything, and fellows like that always put their hooves down. They don't realize that other people may want to get things settled, and can't wait for ever. They just —— Oh, well, it's no good talking about it all. Let's have a tune.'

So then the victim of circumstance would scramble off the window-seat, and switch on the lights, and wind up the gramophone and set the turn-table spinning with plum-coloured band-music. And presently, as the hoarse bleating filled the sitting-room, the two tenants would dance thoughtfully each on his own little bit of carpet, whistling gently to themselves, or sometimes snapping their fingers and saying 'Too-tooty-too.' In this arduous though soothing exercise all mention of girls, fathers, proposals and old boys would vanish for the time being. The records which had been set aside for despatch to Noodles had drifted imperceptibly back into the current repertoire. But then almost anything plum-coloured would have done equally well on these evenings when both tenants had so much to think about.

2

Personal problems don't stand still just because you delay all direct action and confine yourself to mumblings with your head out of a third-floor window in Wykeham Street. Either Mr. Brett would go on meeting Miss Shirley, or else he wouldn't; and as this wasn't really an alternative at all, because of course he did go on meeting her, then the original question of the stage at which Mr. Cottenham was to be taken into his confidence seemed likely to settle itself. For Miss Shirley was here in London, and Mr. Cottenham was at Pippingfold. Could one possibly take a cold-blooded journey down to the country, then, when she might choose that very evening to ask one to another dinner-party? Most certainly one could and would do nothing of the sort. Should one approach this tremendous business in a niggling spirit of pounds, shillings, and pence? Not, apparently, now that one had gone so much too far to go back. One was as honourable as ever about supporting Miss Shirley in the style to which she was accustomed, and one still knew that one hadn't the faintest chance of doing it, but these were no reasons for leaving the field open to utterly unscrupulous rivals. As Snubs had so profoundly remarked, almost anything might happen once a fellow had managed to get engaged. You'd have her on your side, then, and no amount of elderly characters could hold out against a situation like that.

Besides, it wasn't as if one were doomed to have Mr. Cottenham as one's guardian for ever. He had discussed this point with Noodles, and their memories of what they had been told had exactly tallied. At the age of twenty-five — which in his own case was only fourteen months away — Mr. Cottenham was to hand

over the cash on which he had been sitting all this time, and they could then marry anybody that they chose. If they married sooner — which at the date of the discussion had seemed a ridiculous notion — then Mr. Cottenham had first to agree. 'And of course he wouldn't,' Noodles had added, 'so I shan't try.'

The idea of being in a will at all had filled them both with a pleasant sense of importance, of which they were almost immediately intensely ashamed. That was why Beaky had never asked, and consequently had no knowledge, whether the cash were large or small. Whether it had been sprouting at compound interest, or whether it had all been blown on his own and Noodles's education. He didn't scowl horribly when people mentioned his parents, but a corresponding sensibility had made it impossible for him to satisfy his curiosity at Somerset House; for that was Beaky's way, and would equally have been Noodles's if she had ever heard of such a place. He'd look an ass, of course, if Mrs. Shirley asked him straight out; but then she'd never do this unless . . .

'Oh, gosh!' said Beaky, striding up and down his bedroom and glaring at the photograph. 'There's only one question that matters a curse, really. And that is, how the dickens does one propose?'

There were more mumblings on the window-seat that evening, where it must be admitted that the punctilio of anonymity was beginning to break down. The first time that he had said 'Sylvia' by mistake, he had nearly flung himself into the area in his horror and remorse; but after Snubs, by a similar accident, had referred to the old boy as Mr. Cottenham — and had thought it simpler not to apologize — the so-called fellow had drifted pretty rapidly into the first person.

It was 'I' all the time now. It was 'I' to-night as soon as Mr. Burgess had left the sitting-room with his last tray-load.

'I've quite decided, Snubs. I'm going to do it.'

Snubs blew an interrogative puff of smoke.

'I can't go on like this,' said Beaky. 'You can see for yourself I'm going off my nut.'

Snubs nodded, sympathetically.

'I'm going,' said Beaky, 'to jolly well tell her.'

Snubs nodded again.

'It'll probably be the end of everything,' said Beaky. 'I don't imagine for a moment that she'll have me. I can't see any earthly reason why she should. But' — here he clenched his fist and smote the window-sill — 'it's got to be done.'

'I see,' said Snubs. 'Well, I'm sure ——'

'Never mind about that,' said Beaky wildly. 'For Heaven's sake don't say anything encouraging, or it'll only make it all worse. But if I go on like this . . .'

He groaned, and switched back to the beginning.

'Only how?' he asked.

'How what?'

'Ought one to say it, do you think? Or write?'

Snubs gave it as his opinion that letters were dashed risky sort of things.

'Gives 'em time to think,' he added.

'Good God!' said Beaky indignantly. 'But do you suppose I want her to do anything she doesn't want to do? I'm not that sort of fellow.'

'Oh, rather not. But, still ——'

Beaky wasn't listening.

'And if you want the real truth,' he said.

'Yes?'

'Well, if you want the *real* truth, I tried to do it

yesterday. Speaking to her, I mean. And I just . . . My gosh, Snubs, when she looks at you like that, you just can't say *anything!*'

Mr. Brett's voice rose to a wail of agony, and red-hot fragments of Baffy's Mixture fluttered down into Wykeham Street.

'Every single word went clean out of my head,' he moaned. 'I'd got the whole thing ready — not that it was any good, I mean — and I couldn't say one dashed syllable. There's never been such a ghastly failure. Never!'

'Hard luck,' said Snubs. 'Why don't you try the telephone?'

'What?'

'Well, I mean, she couldn't look at you then. And you could learn it all up, and sing it out to her.'

'And have that butler listening on the other extension — not to mention all the girls at the exchange. No, thanks. And you needn't talk about "singing" like that. This isn't a musical comedy, you know.'

'My mistake,' said Snubs.

'What?'

'I'm sorry, I mean. Yes, perhaps you *had* better write.'

'It's the only way,' said Beaky. 'It's the only chance I've got.'

'All right.'

'And I'll register it, don't you think? Not that that'll make any difference.'

'Then why ——'

'Oh, you don't understand. I mean, she's bound to say No, whatever I do. It's an absolute certainty. It's a million to one. It's a dead snip. It's —— Oh, well, it's bound to go wrong, whatever happens. I've

felt that from the beginning. I say — shall we have a tune?'

They scrambled off the window-seat, and had a tune.

3

It is difficult for us to see Mr. Brett's proposal as he writes it, because he has gone into his bedroom and locked the door. He has also hunched himself over the pad of notepaper so closely and protectively that he can hardly see what he is writing himself. We hear the fountain-pen gliding and hesitating, and every now and then he rises and tears another attempt into a great number of very small pieces, which he then burns very carefully in the empty grate. But after a while this seems to be taking too much time, and he thrusts the failures into his pocket — to be dealt with when he shall have achieved what he considers a success. Later still he flings them desperately on to the floor, where we have a chance to read some of them, and note that they almost all begin with the statement that he is only writing this because he simply can't help it — which makes us wonder, perhaps, why they all break off about three lines further down. Hang-dog fragments they are, bursting with violent denunciation of the author and depriving him of every shred of character. They are laden with cringing apologies for his existence, and take pains to point out that the recipient could hardly make a worse choice. Then they stagger into incoherence, and stop, and the fountain-pen rushes back to repeat that preposterous opening.

He groans, straightens his back, and catches sight of a phrase among that welter on the carpet. Seen like

this, in a sudden, fleeting glance, it strikes him as better than some of the later improvements. Perhaps, then, if he forces himself to go through the welter again, he may piece together a letter which really says what he means. He does this. Though he examines each morsel with an expression of unutterable distaste and loathing, there do seem to be bits, here and there, which aren't quite as awful as he had thought. They may seem pretty awful to us, and of course Heaven alone knows how they might strike the recipient; but as other authors have discovered, almost anything that you wrote half an hour ago seems better than what you are writing just now. Slowly but steadily the composite version grows. It is half-way down the page now. It is nearly at the bottom. A large full-stop. It is finished.

Well, not quite; because he is suddenly up against the greatest obstacle of all. How on earth is he going to sign it? Yours sincerely? Too cold. Yours ever? Too daring. Yours? Well, he is hers, of course, but that doesn't look right somehow, either.

As he falters, his gaze wanders back to the body of the text, and in terror lest he should find himself condemning the whole production, he screws up his eyes and jams in the word 'Beaky' without prefix or suffix. She'll know who it's from, anyhow. He'll only make it worse if he tries again.

Speed has now become the one essential. He wrenches at the pad — so violently that he has to replace several sheets. He empties his pocket. He gathers up the débris from the floor. He tears blindly and savagely. He closes the writing-pad and tosses it aside. His tongue plays like lightning over the flap of the registered envelope. The side of his fist crushes it flatter than a pancake.

Miss Sylvia Shirley. 19, Dolphin Street, S.W. 1.

Even in his own handwriting the name makes him tremble, but he recovers himself sufficiently to light one more bonfire in the empty grate, which he watches carefully until the last scrap of evidence has shrivelled and turned black. That's all, then, except for the writing-pad, which must go back in the sitting-room for it is communal property. He rushes to the door, rattles it violently, realizes that it is still locked, unlocks it, and darts precipitately across the landing.

'Oh, hullo!'

Snubs has returned from his work, and is lying in one of the deeply indented armchairs, smoking a pipeful of Baffy's Mixture and reading an evening newspaper.

'Hullo,' he says, without looking up.

Beaky slips the writing-pad back on to its table with infinite silence and caution, and is immediately impelled to burst into unnecessary speech.

'Jus' goin' out pos' letter,' he says — or something that sounds like that.

'All right,' says Snubs.

This time he does look up. His old friend is standing on one leg, smiling stupidly, and waving a registered envelope about as though it had just caught fire and he were trying to extinguish it. Snubs understands all, and resumes his reading.

'Back in second,' says Beaky. His descent of the three flights of stairs sounds as if it were being accomplished on horseback. Then the distant thud of the front door. Snubs thrusts out his lower lip and shrugs one of his shoulders — for he is partly supported on the other. No selfish regret for the break-up of the Wykeham Street establishment deters him from

wishing that registered envelope the very best of luck; but he still feels, somehow, that these things are better done by word of mouth. So does Beaky, if it comes to that; but it's no use attempting the impossible.

The window-seat is very quiet after dinner this evening. For what's posted is posted, and no possible development can take place until after the first delivery to-morrow morning. Personally we don't quite see how it is going to take place even then, for we couldn't help noticing that it was a blank sheet which Mr. Brett folded so fiercely and crammed so powerfully into his envelope, and that the actual declaration is still hiding coyly under the cover of the communal writing-pad.

4

In ignorance of this rather pertinent fact, young Mr. Brett slept, and awoke, and began making a number of very elaborate calculations. This was Thursday. Assuming that Sylvia didn't answer him by telephone — and on the whole this seemed both unlikely and undesirable — and assuming that she did answer by return of post — which was very desirable but distinctly unlikely — then he ought to hear either by the seven o'clock or by the half-past nine. If, on the other hand, she thought it over until, let's say, tea-time, and wrote the same evening, then he'd know the worst by breakfast on Friday. If she took longer than this — well, of course she might, and Heaven knew that he didn't want to hustle her, especially if she were wavering — then he might not hear until the seven o'clock or the half-past nine again. Friday night, that would be. Say Saturday morning, then, as the outside limit. If he didn't hear by Saturday morning, he would —

well, he'd go mad for one thing, and apart from that he didn't quite know what he'd do. Still, hang on to Saturday morning — which was the beginning of his and Snubs's brief Whitsun holiday — and take credit now, while one was still more or less sane, for the control with which one was facing a possible delay of forty-eight hours. If fear were the mainspring of this control, that was neither here nor there. If it were an actual relief to know that by no conceivable chance could the answer arrive with this morning's scrambled eggs, then that was equally irrelevant. Mr. Brett set himself, like an automatic beacon, to flare up punctually at seven o'clock to-night, and thereafter at each successive postal delivery until Saturday morning, and congratulated himself on the sensible way in which he was meeting the most frightful experience of his career.

Having done this, he got up, saw the photograph on his mantelpiece, and was changed in one instant to six feet of quaking, twittering terror. If he could have dragged himself as far as the telephone, he would certainly have rung up Mrs. Shirley's butler, and told him to destroy all registered packages arriving that morning for the daughter of the house — which mightn't have been a bad thing to do. But before he could attempt such a step, Snubs had come wandering in to borrow a safety-razor blade, and Beaky was outwardly himself again.

'Blade? What? Oh, rather. Help yourself.'

'Thanks. Er ——'

'What?'

'Nothing. 'Ksawfully.'

The day had begun, and having begun, most mercifully took charge of Beaky's movements. Breakfast. The underground. The office. The walk home. Seven

o'clock. Well, he hadn't really expected it then, anyhow. Dinner. The window-seat. Half-past nine. Is the postman stopping here? No, he's not. Friday morning, then. Bed. The sleep of utter exhaustion. Hullo! Why have I woken up feeling like this? Oh, yes; of course. Sudden reappearance of Snubs.

'Here you are, old man.'

'What?'

Sharp attack of the staggers.

'I got some more blades yesterday. I thought I'd pay you back.'

'Oh.'

'No letters this morning.'

'Oh.'

They stared at each other. 'Oh,' said Beaky for the third time, and another day had begun. He knew what had happened, of course. She'd really written last night, but that foul butler had forgotten to post it. It would come by the seven o'clock, then. Or by the half-past nine.

It didn't come by the seven o'clock. By a quarter-past nine Snubs, and the window-seat, had been told everything.

'I've made the most hopeless mess of it, Snubs. That's what I've done. I knew that letter was no good at the time. I knew she'd only think it cheek. I've offended her, you see. Well, naturally, I mean. No, shut up; of *course* I've offended her. I've gone and ruined every chance that I ever had. Not that I ever had any. I'll never see her again, I expect. No, shut up; you don't understand.'

Snubs hadn't said anything.

'The fact is,' mumbled Beaky, leaning further out so as to look for the postman, 'that I'm unlucky in every

dashed thing I do. I mean, I've always noticed it. If you ask me, there's a sort of curse on my family. Look at Noodles, I mean. She's just the same.'

Snubs struck a match.

'Don't do that!' said Beaky, hitting the back of his head against the bottom of the sash. 'Gosh, how you startled me!'

'Sorry,' said Snubs.

'I was just saying something, too.'

'Noodles,' suggested Snubs.

'That's right. I told you she was in trouble again, didn't I? I say — is that the postman?'

'No,' said Snubs. 'What happened?'

'To Noodles? I can't make out. Something to do with a man. Upset the old boy like anything, and he sent her back to school. Ridiculous, I call it. But it just shows you.'

'Shows you what?'

We have seldom known Mr. Tipton so talkative.

'What I said,' answered Beaky. 'It shows you the kind of luck we have in my family.'

'But this man. What ——'

'Oh, I don't know. She wrote to Sylvia about it, and she says it was just a ghastly sort of muddle. I can't remember all the details. She never wrote to me.'

'Sounds rather tough,' said Snubs. 'Doesn't sound like Noodles. Funny, her not telling you.'

'Well, I don't suppose it was anything to boast about. Sylvia said the man sounded like a prize horror. Not that Noodles would know the difference. You know what she's like.'

'Yes, but what did the man ——'

'Listen!' said Beaky. 'Here he comes!'

'Who?'

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Dixon High School

'Postman. There he is.'

They watched the postman's slow approach. He came nearer and nearer. About three doors away he stopped and began talking to a female acquaintance in the area. The female acquaintance's laughter, which was clearly audible, struck Beaky as the most objectionable noise that he had ever heard in his life.

'Disgraceful!' he said. 'That's all they do, and then they come begging for Christmas-boxes. I've a jolly good mind to ——'

'He's moving,' said Snubs.

Beaky began to tremble again. The postman delivered a large budget at Number Ninety-Nine, and deliberately crossed the street.

'Hell!' said Beaky.

'There's another chance,' said Snubs. 'I've known him do that before, and then come back again.'

'Well, he's no business to,' said Beaky. 'If he'd got any sense, he'd finish one side properly before —— Oh, Lord! Look at him now.'

He'd met another postman who was lingering with an empty bag by the pillar-box at the corner. Their exchange of fraternal greetings must have taken nearly two minutes, and curse them both if they didn't laugh again!

'You'd think he was doing it on purpose,' said Beaky fretfully. 'I wonder a few more people don't complain. I wonder ——'

He broke off with a sharp sound of indrawn breath. The postman was crossing the street again. He came directly under their window. He mounted the wide doorsteps.

Rat-tat!

'I can't stand this,' said Beaky. 'I know they're all for the dentists.'

'I'll go and see,' said Snubs.

'No!' cried Beaky. 'Wait!'

But Snubs had gone. Beaky rushed out on to the landing, and found himself face to face with Miss Gladys Burgess in her best clothes, who blushed ferociously and tried to force her way into the wall.

'All right,' said Beaky hoarsely. 'No — go on.'

'Beg pardon, sir.'

'Go on!'

'It's quite all right, sir.'

'Blah!' said Beaky, and dashed back into the sitting-room.

'Hi!' said Snubs's voice from below.

He burst out again.

'Hullo!'

'Just coming,' said Snubs's voice. 'No, come on, Miss Burgess. It's all right.'

Beaky danced madly on the third-floor landing

'Buck up, Snubs!'

He ran down three steps, and ran up again backwards.

'Here I am,' said Snubs, appearing round the corner. 'But ——'

'Is that for me?'

'Yes, but ——'

'Here. Gimme.'

'But I think ——'

'*Here!*'

Snubs handed over the solitary envelope which he had extracted from the pile of dental correspondence downstairs, and Beaky dropped it, and caught it while it was still in the air, and fled back into the sitting-room.

And tore it open.

And wrenched at the letter inside.
And began reading it in the middle.
And gave a violent start.
And began reading it at the beginning.
And staggered against the table.
And made the most extraordinary face.
And let out the most ear-splitting yell.
'*Snubs!*'

Mr. Tipton stepped obediently in from the landing.

'What's the matter?' he asked. 'What's up?'

'What isn't?' retorted Mr. Brett, as the tattered envelope dropped from his fingers. 'It's — it's Noodles again. It's the family curse. My gosh, Snubs — do you know what she's done?'

'Not yet,' said Mr. Tipton, patiently.

Beaky gulped, and drew a palsied hand across his throat.

'She's — she's ——'

'Yes?' said his friend encouragingly.

'My gosh, Snubs — she's gug-gone and bolted with a pierrot!'

CHAPTER FIVE

The Shirleys at breakfast — Tiresome accident to a boiler — The kind of woman that Mrs. Shirley was — Effect of Sylvia and her friends on the general public — Southward Ho!

I

'WELL, that's curious,' said Miss Shirley to herself. And she held the sheet of notepaper up to the light.

'I can't make it out,' she said. And she had another good look inside the registered envelope.

'It beats me,' she said. And really it would have beaten anyone. What unknown maniac had taken such trouble to make an April Fool of her practically two months too late?

'Perhaps it's an advertisement of something,' she said. 'Like "Watch This Space." But I don't call it a very good one. Besides, it doesn't look like that sort of handwriting. It looks more like . . .'

She held the envelope sideways, and then upside down, but without reaching any definite conclusion as to what the handwriting did look like.

'I suppose,' she decided, 'that it's someone trying to be funny. I suppose this is where one laughs.'

But did she laugh? Of course she didn't. Who would, when they were still feeling as puzzled as that? Who would, when the first sight of the envelope had given them an extraordinary idea which they were determined to forget?

'I can't think why I thought it might be Beaky,' said Miss Shirley to herself, 'because of course millions of people have that postmark, and he's always telephoned before, and, besides, why on earth should he register it?

When I see him again, I might —— No, I won't, though. Of *course* he'd never do anything as silly as that. And he must *know* how I hate practical jokes. I shan't say anything to anyone, and then whoever it was will see how stupid they are. But I dare say it is an advertisement really, after all.'

She picked up the next envelope on the breakfast-table, which was a very obvious bill, and at the same moment Mrs. Shirley made a sound of impatience and exasperation, and flung one of her own letters on to her plate.

'What is it, Mummie? Something annoying?'

'Maddening,' said Mrs. Shirley.

'Not Mr. Everett again? Oh, what's he done now, Mummie?'

'At Whitsun, too,' said Mrs. Shirley. 'Just as I've got the painters coming in here. They've dropped the new boiler in the station-yard at Pippingfold, and cracked it. He doesn't even apologize.'

'But Mr. Everett didn't drop it, did he?'

'No hot water,' said Mrs. Shirley. 'It's monstrous!'

'But couldn't we use the old boiler, darling?'

'No baths. I knew what would happen. He knows perfectly well one's got to have hot water.'

'Sickening,' said Sylvia. 'What a filthy shame.'

'At Whitsun, too!'

'I know, darling. What shall we do?'

'All my flowers absolutely wasted!'

'Couldn't we go to an hotel, though? Somewhere near, I mean, and then you could go over and look at the garden.'

'I wish they'd dropped Mr. Everett and cracked *him!*'

'But couldn't we, Mummie?'

'What? An hotel? There isn't an hotel for miles. Wasn't that why I took the horrible place?'

'Oh, but you adore it really, darling. You know you do. What about Newcliff?'

'Hateful spot,' said Mrs. Shirley. 'Crowds. Bandstands. Niggers. Besides, it's Whitsun.'

'I adore niggers,' said Sylvia, with a smile that would have made almost any young man go straight off and black his face. 'And darling, you know they'd always make room for you at the Majestic. They said they would, when we went there after my measles.'

Mrs. Shirley snapped her fingers, and moved the coffee-pot.

'I'm sick of hotels,' she said.

'Oh, you're not, darling. You know you love them. Think what fun we could have.'

Mrs. Shirley smiled, too. If we were as rich and as good-natured as Mrs. Shirley, and as easily pleased with almost everything on which we spent our large income, we don't really know what else — in this present world, that is — we could have to ask.

'Shall I ring them up?' asked Sylvia.

'What?'

How they smiled at each other. How happy they were to play this game of pretending that they didn't always want to do the same thing — simply, one supposes, so as to have more to talk about. An ingenious adjustment to the intervals in which the things weren't actually being done. A most admirable way of filling in those rare but inevitable gaps. There might be a better game one day for Sylvia; there might have been a better game once for her mother; but — think what fun we're having.

'Shall I try, darling? Shall I get through and talk to them?'

'I wonder if Carter would like it.'

'Oh, Mummie!'

Mrs. Shirley blew out the flame under the coffee-pot, and gathered up her letters.

'Be quick, then,' she said. 'I want to speak to Mr. Everett while I'm still feeling angry. And this weather . . . Well, I suppose it wasn't his fault, really. But I shall give him a fright. Oh, yes . . . And, Sylvia ——'

'Yes, darling?'

'As high as they like, but we *must* look over the sea.'

'Oh, of course.'

'They'll be full up, though.'

'Oh, no, they won't.'

'I'm glad you're wearing that little frock again. Any amusing letters?'

'It's the one we got in Paris; do you remember? No, only bills and filth.'

'Fancy talking about boilers on a day like this! But I must see my Darwins.'

'You shall, darling. You shall see everything.'

Mrs. Shirley smiled, and looked round the dining-room, and sighed, and went out. Miss Shirley made a long arm for the telephone on the side-table, and smiled, and asked for Trunks. While she was waiting for Trunks, she slewed her head round and took another glance at the registered envelope. But if it was a joke, it hadn't annoyed her; and if it was a mistake, it didn't matter; and if it was an advertisement — well, as a matter of fact, that was probably what it was.

Advertisers might profitably note where their ingenuity has at length landed them, and how successfully they have taught us all to look for nothing else. 'Oh,' says Miss Sylvia Shirley, on receiving a blank sheet of notepaper in a registered envelope; 'an ad-

vertisement, of course.' The word at once releases her from any further interest in the matter, and she asks Trunks to put her through to Newcliff-on-Sea.

2

The Majestic Hotel laughed thinly at the other end of the line.

'Not a room to be had,' it said, in a crisp, feminine voice. 'We've been booked up for months. You won't get anything now, you know.'

It sounded pleased, patronizing, and slightly bored. It sounded like the voice in a box-office where fashion has suddenly smiled. It sounded like a grocer during the great war.

'I'm speaking for Mrs. Shirley,' said Sylvia. And she began spelling it.

An extraordinary change came over the voice at the other end of the line.

'Just a minute,' it said. 'I'll see what we can do.'

It sounded eager, apologetic, and humble. It sounded like a voice that was sorry it had ever been crisp. It sounded like a grocer before the great war.

It could just be heard talking to another voice, and the other voice obviously had very little patience with it. The other voice appeared to fell it with some blunt instrument, to kick the body aside, and to take its place at the telephone.

'Mrs. Shirley? I'm sorry there was any misunderstanding, madam. That will be quite all right.'

'Looking over the sea?' said Sylvia.

'Of course, madam.'

The new voice — a masculine voice, with a suggestion of morning-coat and neatly striped trousers, and lustrous black hair with a slight wave in it — was

clearly prepared to turn the whole hotel round, if necessary, so only that Mrs. Shirley's rooms should look over the sea.

'That will be quite all right,' it said again. 'I've got just what you want, madam.'

'Thank you,' said Sylvia. 'We'll be coming down this afternoon, then.'

'Any time you like, madam. Delighted.'

'Good-bye,' said Sylvia.

'Thank *you*, madam,' said the voice.

Miss Shirley put the receiver back with an air of tranquil accomplishment, and went upstairs to think about packing. Nothing in this conversation had surprised her, and nothing had marked it as exceptional. People were always like that until they heard Mummie's name, and then they were always like this. They're never like this with us, but then we never expect them to be — which is the chief secret of it all. A victim in our own category will, we imagine, find that an unaccountable mistake has been made about his reservation when he reaches Newcliff to-night; or else it is the practice of all hotels to keep a suite up their sleeves even at Whitsun, in case a Mrs. Shirley should suddenly come along. What would happen, one wonders, if two or more Mrs. Shirleys came along on the same day? We give it up. All we know is that the lustrous black hair would manage it somehow. It may be a miracle, but it is a very commonplace one.

So Sylvia left Beaky's envelope and his blank sheet of paper on the breakfast-table, and thought about packing. And packed. And went out for a walk. And thought what a marvellous day it was. And wondered if Noodles's school would let her come out to lunch at the Majestic. And actually thought about Noodles's

brother, and wondered when she would see him again. And thought, again, how he was really most awfully nice. And thought how he was really a pearl. And thought how she was really quite stupid about him, and how she'd never really been so stupid about anybody else. And thought how if she chose to let herself go, she could be even stupider — quite easily. And decided, suddenly, that she hadn't really thought any of these things, and she didn't really want anything to happen, because it was no good going and being stupid. And, besides, everything was really so awfully nice as it was.

And she met several friends on various sections of hot or shady pavement, and stopped and talked to them, and the people who went by stared at them, and became rather stupid too. Because these people thought how disgraceful it was that young women should stand about on the pavement, doing nothing for the benefit of the human race, and looking so monstrously cool, and wearing stockings like that, and upsetting people who had got such much more important things to think about. And particularly they were annoyed with Sylvia and her friends because they gave them lumps in their throats and chests just as they were cursing the luxury of the age and deciding what fine fellows they were themselves; because of their damnable air of innocence, and their abominable youth, and their utterly unjustifiable claim to be, in some ridiculous way, pathetic. So these people scowled and rushed along the hot or shady pavement; for it was intolerable that they should be over thirty on a day like this, and insufferable that they should be wasting their time on regrets, and unbearable that their lives were not altogether different in every way. And then

they suddenly forgot all about Sylvia and her friends, and stopped scowling and hurrying, and only knew that something rather nice had just happened to them, and that they were fine fellows again, after all.

Thus Sylvia and her friends disturbed the traffic of several well-known streets; and then she came home again, and did a little unpacking, and a little repacking, and a little face-making in one or two different hats, and quite agreed with her mother about the little frock from Paris, and hunted for her keys, and couldn't find them but found some more handkerchiefs instead — which are always useful — and danced for a minute or two because she happened to feel like it. And shouted: 'All right, darling. Just coming!' And went downstairs to lunch.

'What news about the boiler, Mummie?'

'They're sending another one off to-day. By road, this time.'

'Poor Mr. Everett!'

'Nonsense.'

'Oh, Mummie! What about asking Noodles Brett to come over to lunch one day? To-morrow or Sunday, I mean. Shall we?'

'Noodles Brett?'

'Oh, darling — you remember. Beaky's sister. She's at school at Newcliff.'

'Beaky?'

'Oh, darling — *please!*'

Please what? Please don't play that other game of pretending you don't understand. Please don't look at me with that other sort of smile that understands much too much. Please, in fact, don't make it more difficult than it has all suddenly become anyhow.

The other sort of smile vanishes.

Not Property of U.S.
Post Library No. 2
Camp Sutton, N. C.

'Ask anybody you like,' says Mrs. Shirley obligingly. 'I shall never know your friends apart.'

'Oh, Mummie!'

'But as long as they look nice . . .'

'Oh, Mummie! You are so awfully ——'

'What?'

'Mummie-ish. Aren't you? And on purpose, too.'

What on earth are they talking about? The celebrated butler hasn't the faintest idea.

3

Here comes the big car, sweeping over the tarred roads that sweep towards the holiday coast. The roads themselves, and the big car, are dark and glistening, but the colour of the early summer is, as Sylvia says, almost deafening. Great blazes of blossom in the neat orchards and gardens; gorse rivalling the sun itself; the trees so green as to make you blink; the sky so blue as to take your breath away. Indescribable tints among the heavy shadows. Little villas all twinkling on the hillsides — doing their level best to look hideous, but hardly succeeding on an afternoon like this. Petrol pumps glowing like tropical plants. Sports-models flashing past like huge humming-birds. Everything shimmering and sparkling as hard as it can. Even the East Surrey omnibuses are beautiful in their bright red paint.

The age of luxury doesn't wait for Saturday morning to come pouring out of smoky London. A myriad wheels are whizzing southward; a myriad passengers are wedged among a myriad suitcases. The blue and khaki patrols are saluting until you would think their arms must drop off. The noise and smell are, as Sylvia says, almost blinding. But the great

Carter skims through it all with incredible calm and dexterity, his expressionless eyes solving problem after problem in fractions of a split second. The back of his neck seems to radiate slightly scornful efficiency; the flick of his gloved hand exacts obedience even from motor-bicyclists. Mrs. Shirley wishes that he wouldn't go quite so fast, but this is one of the very few wishes that she seems unable to obtain. He does go most infernally fast, and, after all, the faster he goes, the sooner it will be over. But Sylvia doesn't care if he goes as fast as the wind. She is too young to have considered the practical possibility of going any slower.

The tarred road forks at a gaily painted sentry-box, and another uniformed arm jerks an encouraging salute.

'That was the way to Pippingfold, Mummie. Did you see?'

'Was it?'

'Well, it looked rather like it, I thought. Oh, look at all those people in that char-à-bancs! Aren't they sweet!'

'Were they?'

'Well, you know what I mean, darling. They looked so hot and hopeful.'

'They always do.'

'Mummie, darling — you're not still worried about that boiler, are you?'

'Oh, no.'

'I think it'll be rather fun seeing Noodles again. You know, I like her awfully. She wrote me the most extraordinary letter. I've never seen such spelling in my life.'

'I thought she was attractive.'

'What a grown-up word, darling. Why don't you like her?'

'I do.'

'Then who don't you like? Mummie!'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'But it's all right, really. You know I'd always tell you everything. And if it isn't the boiler, then it must be me. But you're not to think things.'

'You wait till your daughter grows up.'

'How absurd, darling. I tell you . . .'

'What do you tell me?'

'Well, there's nothing to tell. But *if* . . .'

With tremendous emphasis on this suspended conditional, Miss Shirley brings the conversation — if you can call it a conversation — to an end. She lies back against the fawn-coloured upholstery, and wriggles her shoulders and twists her feet. She appears to have nothing to add to the suspended conditional, and no feeling that any kind of addition is needed. She is singing now — a dance-tune without any words. Perhaps she is waiting for her daughter to grow up.

A moment ago the tarred road appeared to be heading straight for a wall of pale-green down where it must either stop altogether or else climb a gradient on which no car in the world could follow it. But in the mysterious way that these things happen, the pale-green down is no longer there. It has changed its shape, and slid round to another quarter of the compass. Hardly rising at all, or seeming to alter its direction, the tarred road is now rushing swiftly towards a line of faint silver which has been stretched across a new and unnaturally high horizon.

The song, the wriggling and the twisting all cease at the same instant.

'Oh, look, Mummie! The sea!'

'What?'

'The sea! Don't you adore it when it does that? Oh, and look at all those horrible little houses. Aren't they perfect! Aren't you *thrilled*, darling? Oh, it reminds me of my measles, and what fun we had afterwards. Oh, look at those chickens! Isn't it all too deliciously ghastly and disgusting for words!'

It certainly is, as the petrol pumps come thicker and faster, and the bungalows begin crowding together, and the turf is scarred by untidy excavations or disfigured by the nameless wreckage which has been left there to rust and to rot. An isolated hoarding, covered with sun-bleached advertisements, suddenly cuts off the view on the left. On the right a series of competitive announcements on stilts invite the visitor to half-a-dozen different hotels. Then a row of vile workmen's cottages (or of workmen's vile cottages), each with festoons of lace behind its tightly closed bow-window. Some of them seem to be trying, in a fumbling and half-hearted sort of way, to be shops as well — their principal merchandise consisting of mineral waters and india-rubber heels. More petrol pumps. Another great burst of hoarding, where the familiar metropolitan designs alternate with almost Victorian pictures of bedroom furniture. An outbreak of new building, with salmon-pink window-frames rising from yellow-brick walls. 'Motorists, Please Drive Slowly Through Newcliff.' A railway bridge. A public-house, with still more petrol pumps. A gothic chapel. 'The Preacher Next Sunday will be ——' Impossible to read any more because of the pot-holes surrounding the tram terminus. The first tram; almost a museum-piece in its way, but trundling doggedly along in the comfortable knowledge that it is costing the Newcliff ratepayers a little more every month. Stucco houses, with front

gardens and carriage sweeps. A concourse of many streets converging on one of the tallest cast-iron sewer-ventilators that can ever have been erected. A regular Nelson's Column of a sewer-ventilator, culminating in an openwork crown, and dwarfing the policeman at its base who has just flapped a pair of white gloves at the big car.

Holdren's Garage. Open Day and Night.
Why Go Further?

The big car never troubles to answer this question. Leaves Holdren's mechanics conducting a post-mortem on a decrepit three-wheeler which has obviously no intention of going any further; leaves the tram-lines also; and sweeps off into a crescent of real shops, the owners of which have celebrated the fine weather by bringing most of their stock out on to the pavements. This, in turn, has sent the pedestrians into the roadway, and even the great Carter has to drive slowly through Newcliff. At the next cross-roads, though beckoned forward by another policeman, he has to pull up altogether, owing to the obstruction caused by a vehicle peculiar to towns of this nature. A hand-barrow being slowly propelled by an elderly inhabitant, and covered with two large flat surfaces meeting at their upper edges in an acute angle. The flat surfaces are adorned with particoloured lettering of an amateurish description, and the whole contrivance is a perambulating reminder that the Diamond Dominoes — whoever they may be — are performing nightly in, or at, the Pavilion Chalet; and why anything should be called that, one can really hardly say.

If the great Carter's glance could pulverize this hand-barrow and reduce the elderly inhabitant to

ashes, it would assuredly do so. But Sylvia, of course, is thrilled again.

'Oh, look, Mummie! They've got a concert-party here already. Oh, we must go and see them. I'm sure they'll be quite awful, and I shall laugh till I'm sick.'

The hand-barrow, for once, seems to be justifying its expense. For though Mrs. Shirley smiles and says 'Nonsense,' she doesn't really mind whether she goes or not. And perhaps it will be rather a good thing if her daughter laughs to the extent indicated. She hasn't been laughing quite as much as usual this last week or two.

'Oh, please, darling. It's just what I feel like.'

'Do you? Well, we'll see.'

'Any time, I mean. I don't really mind.'

'No, of course we'll go.'

The enthusiasm seems suddenly to have changed places on the back seat, but they don't say any more at the moment. The big car has broken loose again, and is careering past another crescent of villa-residences to the esplanade itself.

An infinite perspective of lamp-posts, iron railings, little shelters, human beings, bath-chairs, band-stands, bow-windows and parking-places is brilliantly revealed. On the left the English Channel laps merrily against the shingle between the groynes. For the first time, almost, it is possible to smell something apart from exhaust-gases and tar. The travellers take deep breaths, and are decidedly glad that they have come.

'Oh, look at them all!' says Sylvia — meaning the human beings. 'Aren't they marvellous!'

They are.

'Oh, look at that fat one!'

The fat one is really a splendid example.

'And that one with the bare legs!'

The one with the bare legs might not appeal to all tastes, but is distinctly worth looking at.

'And here we are, darling.'

And here they are. The big car whirls into the front garden of the Majestic Hotel, crunches over the gravel, and stops. The revolving doors spin and sparkle as the frock-coated porter comes rushing out. Impossible to tell whether he really remembers Mrs. Shirley — as he appears to do — or is merely welcoming her as he welcomes all such unmistakable members of her sect. He is indefatigable in extracting the luggage. Tireless in handing it over to the two underlings in sleeved waistcoats who have also burst from the revolving doors. Nothing is too much trouble for him, and if he weren't stopped he would have gone off with Carter's little suitcase as well.

'This way, madam. This way, miss.'

The revolving doors again. The cool, dark and somewhat airless hall. The mahogany bower with the huge register. The morning-coat and neatly-striped trousers. The lustrous black hair with a slight wave in it. The key. The page-boy. The booming of the old-fashioned lift.

Well, as we said before, here they are, and here they propose to remain. Snubs and Beaky are just thinking of leaving their offices, more than sixty-five miles away. Mr. Cottenham is in his study at the Manor House, Pippingfold. Mr. Everett, that successful architect, is playing Bridge at his Club. Mr. Fitzgibbon is, as usual, waiting for a letter from his lawyer, and for the result of the last race at Lingfield. Miss Mulberry is writing a telegram in her private study at St. Ethelburga's.

And Noodles — Ah, you were hoping for news of Noodles, were you?

You shall have it. Noodles is —

Wait a minute, though. This is where we start another chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

News of Noodles — Odious conduct of Miss Maplethorpe — Gallant action by Channel-swimmer — Further misfortunes of Noodles — Startling escape from St. Ethelburga's — What was in Beaky's letter.

I

'WELL?' said Miss Mulberry, all bright and fresh again after a fortnight on the Italian lakes and nearly a week with her mother at Haslemere. 'So you're not leaving us after all, then?'

'Well, no,' said Noodles, with a look of anxious suspicion.

'Your guardian changed his mind, then?'

'Well, yes,' said Noodles, still wondering if she were dealing with tact or ignorance.

'It was lucky,' said Miss Mulberry, 'that we were able to have you.'

What she meant, of course, was that St. Ethelburga's was no dumping-ground for unwanted wards, but a successful school with a long waiting-list; and that if Mr. Cottenham had changed his mind at the beginning instead of at the end of the scholastic year, then he would certainly have telegraphed in vain. But Noodles took it otherwise.

'Oh, Miss Mulberry,' she said. 'Do you really mean that? And after you thought you'd got rid of me, and everything?'

Moreover, her eyes became most alarmingly limpid.

'There, there, Ursula,' said Miss Mulberry. 'Of course we're glad to see you again.'

('I don't believe you are,' said Noodles to herself. 'Only why did you say it was lucky, then?')

'And you must try and settle down again,' added Miss Mulberry, 'just as if there'd never been any idea of your leaving. I dare say it's a little difficult, but you'll help us, won't you?'

Noodles reflected that it was absolutely impossible. You couldn't push a grown-up person back into a schoolgirl. But she was pretty certain now that Mr. Cottenham hadn't explained why the attempt was being made, and this did a great deal to restore her spirits.

'I'm afraid,' she said politely, 'that I've rather forgotten everything I ever learnt here, but ——'

Miss Mulberry didn't seem to like this suggestion.

'I mean,' said Noodles, 'that when one thinks one's left school for good, of course one forgets everything. Doesn't one, Miss Mulberry?'

Miss Mulberry wondered if Haslemere and the Italian lakes had refreshed her as much as she had imagined.

'Nonsense, Ursula,' she said. 'You oughtn't to speak like that.'

'I'm sorry,' said Noodles. 'I only thought . . .'

'Well? What?'

'Well, it's true, I'm afraid,' said Noodles, rather sadly. 'So I thought I'd better tell you. You see ——'

But it was no good explaining, if Miss Mulberry looked at one in that sort of way. And perhaps it was unkind, when she had really tried to teach one such an awful lot.

'I'm sorry,' said Noodles. 'I dare say it'll all come back. Or bits of it, don't you know?'

'You must try and be sensible, Ursula.'

'Oh, I will. Not that ——'

'What?'

'Nothing. I expect you're busy, aren't you?'

Of course the head mistress of St. Ethelburga's was busy on the first day of the summer term. But was she never to be allowed to end these interviews in her own way?

'Really,' she began; 'I —— That is — I don't ——'

But this was mere waste of time.

'Well, don't let me hear that you've been getting into any more difficulties,' she said majestically. 'You understand me, Ursula?'

For a moment Noodles had misunderstood her most completely. She had gasped, and blushed, and trembled, and looked like a tigress. But Miss Mulberry's bewilderment reassured her. It was queer of Mr. Cottenham to have said nothing about the Fitzgibbon affair, but she now definitely knew that he had kept it to himself. It was rather decent of him, she thought, and this decency should be rewarded.

'I swear,' she said dramatically, 'that I'll try like — like anything, I mean.'

She had just been going to say 'like the very devil,' but of course that wasn't the way to begin.

'I swear ——'

'Well, now I *am* rather busy,' said Miss Mulberry.

'What? Oh, I see. All right, Miss Mulberry. Thanks most awfully.'

'Shut the door!' shouted the head mistress. 'Ursula! Come back and shut the door!'

But Noodles's good resolution had already carried her out of earshot. She was running upstairs, two and sometimes three steps at a time, to finish her unpacking in the little white cubicle. 'And after all,' she was saying to herself, 'even if I have forgotten everything, it's their job to teach it me again.' She extricated one

stout pair of brown shoes with leather soles from the folds of a bathing dress. 'And anyhow,' she said to herself, 'I haven't forgotten how to swim. And there wouldn't have been any swimming if I'd stopped at Pippingfold.'

She looked up, and saw a crowd in the doorless doorway.

'Hullo!' she said.

'Hullo, Noodles. I say, we thought you'd left.'

'Oh, no,' said Noodles. 'That was a mistake.'

'I say, what do you mean?'

'I mean, I haven't left. I've come back, I mean.'

'I say, how ripping!'

Noodles dived into the battered trunk and fished out half a pair of black indoor shoes with low heels.

'I say, Noodles!'

'Yumps?'

She looked rather fierce, with her hair all over her eyes.

'I say, have you learnt any new tunes?'

'Oh, yes. Our parlourmaid has a Sunday paper with awfully good tunes in it. I've learnt a lot. Do you know "Crying and Crooning"?'

Some of the crowd seemed to have heard of this little work, while others hadn't. But they all wanted to hear it.

'Oh, do sing it us, Noodles.'

'I mustn't,' said Noodles. 'Not here, I mean.'

'Oh, go on, Noodles. Nobody's listening. They're all much too busy. Oh, come on, Noodles!'

'I can't really. Old Mulberry said ——'

'Oh, bilge,' interrupted one of the crowd. 'I don't believe you know it.'

'I do!'

'Well, play it, then. They won't hear you.'

'Well, just the chorus.'

'Is that all you know?'

'No, of course it isn't. I can play it beautifully.'

'Well, play it beautifully, then. I don't believe you can.'

Noodles snatched the stringed-instrument off the fixed dressing-table, and sat down on the bed, and began to play as beautifully as anyone can play when the performance is also part of an argument.

'"Now that you've left me,"' she sang, '"Now that I'm sad; Now that your photo is Driving me mad; Now that I'm lonely, Now that I'm blue . . ."'

There was an upward roll here, and she really did it most awfully well.

'"Now that ——"'

She looked up to see if it had been appreciated. To her astonishment, the audience had entirely evaporated. There wasn't a trace of them.

'Silly!' said Noodles to herself. 'I suppose they think they're being funny. All right. I shall sing louder than ever.'

She did so.

'"Now that I'm yearning and burning for you-oo . . ." Oh! I beg your pardon, Miss Maplethorpe. I'm awfully sorry. I was just unpacking, I mean, and . . .'

Of course this *would* happen. On the very first day, too. And just when she'd promised not to get into trouble. Bother! Coming padding along the corridor like that, too. Why couldn't they have told her?

Miss Maplethorpe was one of those ones who let you flounder on until you're in it right up to the neck. Who never said anything until you'd made it all much worse.

'I mean, I just wanted to see if it was in tune, and I never thought . . . I mean, it was really just a sort of accident, and of course . . . I mean, I know one isn't supposed to, but . . . I mean, I'm most frightfully sorry about it. I mean ——'

'You mean,' interrupted Miss Maplethorpe, 'that you were deliberately breaking a well-known rule. Is that it?'

'No,' said Noodles. 'I mean, yes. I mean ——'

'Perhaps,' said Miss Maplethorpe silkily, 'you'd better let me take care of that — that instrument for you, Ursula. It would be a pity if there were any more — accidents.'

'Oh, Miss Maplethorpe!'

'Well?'

'Oh, please, Miss Maplethorpe! I mean ——'

'Thank you,' said the diabolical Miss Maplethorpe, helping herself to the instrument, and looking very ridiculous with it. 'I think the safest place for this will be in my charge. Even if it gets a little out of tune. And please remember, Ursula, that rules are made to be kept. Not to be broken on the first day of a new term. Now perhaps you'd better tidy up some of this extraordinary mess.'

That was the end of Miss Maplethorpe, for the time being. Some of the crowd came back presently, and pretended to be sympathetic. They pretended, also, to admire poor Noodles for an act of insubordination which was entirely their fault. But she didn't want their sympathy or their admiration, even if it had been genuine. All she wanted was her stringed-instrument, and to be left alone.

'Oh, go away!' she said, unpacking more vehemently and chaotically than ever.

The crowd laughed, and went away.

'Idiot!' said Noodles, meaning herself; and snatched at a nightgown that had stuck in the hinge of the battered trunk; and tore it into two practically equal parts; and danced with exasperation; and knocked the tooth-glass off the little washstand and broke it. And rushed to pick it up, and hit her head on an open drawer.

And said: 'Damn!'

So the summer term at St. Ethelburga's began very badly indeed. But the awful thing was that it got steadily worse as it went on.

2

It wasn't only that — as she had so conscientiously informed the head mistress — she had forgotten almost everything that St. Ethelburga had taught her, and that the other mistresses couldn't be brought to see how easy and natural this was. It wasn't only that a series of extraordinary misfortunes continued to pursue her, however careful she was to avoid them. It wasn't only that she could no longer practise the upward roll under the bedclothes — which had been so remarkably comforting in many previous crises. Far worse than any of these incidental annoyances was the continual sensation that she had been caught and put back into prison within three weeks of having earned a quite reasonably honourable discharge. 'I never *asked* to leave,' she said bitterly to herself. 'I wouldn't even have *started* feeling grown-up, if I'd known I'd got to be here till July. But you can't possibly feel ungrown-up once you know what it's like. I don't say,' she admitted to herself, 'that I was doing it so awfully well, and of course I was most awfully stupid over poor

Fitzgibbon; but — well, I'm not anything now. I'm out of it here, and yet I'm stuck in the middle of it. And I know they all wish I'd never come back, but of course they can't say so. I feel just like one of those backward boys at Mr. Dudgeon's — only they're probably a great deal happier. I feel exactly like the Man in the Iron Mask.'

This interesting historical parallel shows us that Noodles could read, even if she couldn't spell. Also that she could still remember things which nobody had tried to teach her. But it was, and she knew it, only her age and the lack of precedent which were preventing her from being degraded to a lower class. She simply *couldn't* pick up the tangled thread of education where she had so enthusiastically laid it down. Miss Quilter, who was immediately responsible for directing her studies, had to cheat almost openly, over and over again, so as to save her own face and maintain corporate discipline.

'And yet,' she complained, in the mistresses' room, 'she looks at you all the time as though she knew things that you'd never heard of. I suppose it's not my business to say so, but whoever sent her back here made the most appalling mistake. Not,' added Miss Quilter, 'that she isn't worth all the rest of my girls put together. In some ways.'

'In what ways?' asked Miss Maplethorpe.

'In most ways,' said Miss Quilter.

'I wish I didn't agree with you,' said Miss Maplethorpe.

'It's true, though,' said Miss Kent.

'*Elle est si mignonne*,' said Mademoiselle Lanval, who might perhaps have come up to Noodles's shoulder. '*Mais son écriture — mon Dieu!*'

'I know who you're talking about,' said Miss Cowley, who had just come into the room, and must have been reacting slightly after a grammar-lesson in the junior school. 'Ursula Brett, isn't it? I thought so. I shall never forget that day, about four years ago, when she . . .'

And so on, until the bell rang that sent them all back to the front line. Among these noble but unfortunate women the subject of Noodles seemed absolutely inexhaustible; but they had to do something, of course, when she said that the square root of four-hundred and forty-one was seventeen, or that Cædmon was a mountain in Wales. They couldn't let St. Ethelburga's go to pieces altogether — because they would have gone with it.

Meanwhile Noodles had employed her *écriture* on the extraordinary letter to Sylvia. Extraordinary, in Sylvia's view, mainly because of its orthography, but extraordinary also because it began so frankly and ended so abruptly. 'In case you're Wondering,' it said, 'why I'm here again and not at Pipingfold, the Fact is that their was a Mudle about a man. I wasnt thinking and the fact is that Mr. Cottenham found out and was anoyed. Of Course it was all a Misstake. I shall not discloze his Name, but be ware of anyone with a red Face in riding-britches in case he is Still there. This is really confidental as of course I was an apaling (? appalling) Fool but wanted you to know why I cant come over to Green Haches in Case you are there. Sickening but I have lernt my Lesson!! So now I am back at Snt. Ethelburgas and . . .'

At this point the ink in the extraordinary letter changed from a deep black — which showed how slowly and painstakingly it had so far been written —

to the pale-blue of a hurried and almost slap-dash conclusion. The fact was — to use the writer's favourite phrase — that however sickening it was and however much one was hating it all, one couldn't possibly complain to a friend like Sylvia. One particularly didn't want a friend like Sylvia to think she'd got to be sorry for one, or to make this letter anything but an explanation of why one couldn't come over for tennis.

'. . . and it is very fine and we are haveing lots of Games. With love from Noodles.'

Blot it quickly, and put it in the post-box before one changed one's mind and said how miserable one was, and how no one realized that one was grown-up, and how one hadn't even got one's stringed-instrument. And all the other things that one had jolly nearly said. And was thankful that one hadn't.

The letter went to Green Hatches and on to Dolphin Street, and Sylvia wrote back most awfully sweetly, you know, but of course not really understanding because how could she? And as Noodles had now nothing left to write about except the fine weather and the lots of games — for less than ever could she complain to anyone as nice as Sylvia — the correspondence automatically closed.

'Perhaps I'll see her again one day,' she said to herself. But it was difficult to believe that she ever would. The long weeks of the summer term seemed to stretch out ahead of her to the very crack of doom.

And then her unlucky star flamed into the sky again.

3

On fine mornings in May, June, and July, and at about the hour when the golfers on the two Newcliff courses are just finishing their first rounds, a very

common spectacle is that of the little processions which emerge from the innumerable red-brick schools, and steer their course towards the seacoast. The units in these processions — which may be composed of either sex — carry towels and bathing-dresses, and are shepherded on their way by the masters or mistresses who are responsible for getting them into and out of the ocean. This is a part of the units' education on which the schools lay great stress — adopting, in fact, a proprietory attitude towards the English Channel in their prospectuses which reminds one of their similar treatment of the local sunlight and air. As, however, they are very careful to keep out of it whenever it is at all cold or rough, the English Channel has little chance to retaliate. There was a rumour once that one of Mr. Dudgeon's backward boys had succeeded in getting himself drowned, but as it has not so far reached Mr. Dudgeon one can only suppose that it was greatly exaggerated. Whatever the backward boy's parents might have felt, one can hardly imagine Mr. Dudgeon overlooking an incident like that.

So the little processions come shuffling down to the beach — not in the town itself, but in one of those coves which lie between Newcliff and Old Man's Head — and having undressed among some large and abrasive rocks, they tiptoe with considerable agony to the water's brink. The swimmers then swim — but on no account further than the rowing-boat, in which an ancient mariner in a blue jersey bobs about at a distance of about fifteen yards from the shore; while the non-swimmers endeavour to avoid instruction from the ancient mariner's son, whose method is to catch his victims by the slack of their garments and to tow them along with their heads under water, at the same time

adjuring them to Strike Out in a voice that is strangely reminiscent of a fog-horn in full blast. His name is Corcoran, and except when he is keeping one of these educational appointments he employs the style and title of 'Professor.' But the schools frown on this attempt to borrow their closely guarded thunder. They refuse to admit that a man can be a professor simply because he has snakes tattooed on his arms and a voice like a fog-horn in full blast. They call him a Well-Known Expert in their prospectuses, but that is absolutely as far as they will go.

After about a quarter of an hour of this ritual, one of the shepherds blows a whistle and the amphibians all come out again. They dry themselves, in obedience to a running fire of threats and injunctions. They dress themselves, as far as possible in their own clothes. They are formed into another procession. They are carefully checked and counted. And off they stagger on the long climb towards their particular red-brick school. By the time that they eventually reach it, they are all far hotter and stickier than they were when the expedition originally set out. Nevertheless, the prospectuses have been vindicated, and the extra expense of a seaside education has been justified. There is no question that they have all either swum or — technically speaking — had a swimming-lesson. Well done, Professor Corcoran; and well done, old Mr. Corcoran out there in the rowing-boat. You can pull up your lobster-pots now and go back to the esplanade. You have done quite as much as many other Well-Known Experts, and we cannot — nor will we — say fairer than that.

But Noodles, for some reason, had always been able

to swim. After all, she had said to herself, why not? There was the water, and there were you. And you got into it. And you swam. Moreover, you swam so fast that Professor Corcoran had never been able to catch hold of the slack of your garments, and had to content himself with adjuring you to Strike Out — which you were doing anyhow. So you left him, and swam off to the rowing-boat, and hung on to the gunwale and had the most interesting conversations with old Mr. Corcoran about bait and other longshore subjects. Until you heard your name being shouted, and had to leave him and swim back again. And then the nicest part of the day was over, and you went back to St. Ethelburga's for boiled mutton and rice-pudding, and for the interminable tedium of afternoon school.

But on this particular hot, fine morning Noodles arrived at the rowing-boat to find that the Professor's father was to all intents and purposes asleep. That is to say that though his gnarled hands were still sculling gently so as to keep his vessel in its proper bearings, his eyes were closed and his pipe had fallen out of his mouth. No point in disturbing him, thought Noodles, and swam away on a course parallel with the English coast. This course was dictated by scrupulous obedience to St. Ethelburga's regulations, which would have allowed you to swim right round your native land so long as you never landed and were never more than fifteen yards from shore.

The regulations, however, had never really considered the possibility of anyone being able to swim like Noodles, and in a very few minutes she had gone right past the projecting rocks which marked the townward end of the educational cove. The sea wasn't blue or green or any colour except that of blinding, sparkling

light. Noodles turned on her back and screwed up her eyes, and sang, and continued to advance head first — kicking a good deal as she did so.

'"Why did you leave me?"' she sang. '"Why did you go? Why did you teach me The things that ——" Oh, I say!'

She still thought it was jellyfish as she turned the other way up. But the mistake was obvious as she shook the water out of her eyes. It was a human face, and what was more it seemed to be startled out of its wits.

'I say!' she called out. 'I'm most awfully sorry I ——'

'Help!' said the face, and sank like a stone.

'Hi!' shouted Noodles. 'I say!'

The face suddenly came up again, looking more startled than ever, and blew a fountain of water into the ocean.

'Glub! Gop!' it said wildly. And down it went again.

'Don't be a fool!' cried Noodles. 'What on earth are you doing? Where are you?'

Punctually as before, the face bobbed up — looking at least ten times more bewildered — and flapped its mouth in a weak, stupid sort of way, and began sinking for the third time.

'No, you don't!' said Noodles, rather sharply; and she made a grab at its hair. It instantly developed almost all the characteristics of an infuriated octopus, and Noodles found herself fighting for existence about two feet below the surface of the water. 'Ridiculous,' she was saying to herself. 'So pointless, I mean. Why can't he keep his silly head?'

The struggle continued with great violence.

'All right,' said Noodles, under the water. 'Drown yourself, then!'

She delivered the most frightful jab with her knee, and found herself back in the light and air.

'Bother!' she said to herself. 'Now I've lost him.'

Not a bit of it. In defiance of all custom and convention, the face actually came up for the fourth time, and though it was now the most indescribably disgusting colour, it spluttered almost as powerfully as ever.

Noodles pushed it as hard as she could, hooked an elbow under its chin and struck out — as Professor Corcoran would have said — for the not so very distant shingle. 'Idiot!' she kept gasping. 'Stupid little man! I'll teach you to go kicking like that.'

Since the owner of the face was now being throttled as well as drowned, he no longer kicked either like that or in any other way. He just became heavier and heavier, until finally he grounded on a little sand-bank. Noodles then sat him up, thumped his back, pulled his hair, and yelled very loudly in his ear.

As the result of this treatment he began opening his eyes.

'Hullo,' he said, feebly. 'What happened?'

'Spit it out,' said Noodles. 'Don't mind me.'

The stranger immediately availed himself of this suggestion — whether he had heard it or not — and Noodles looked the other way.

'I was trying to float,' he said presently. 'Something seemed to hit me.'

Noodles looked uncomfortable.

'That was me,' she said. 'I never saw you.'

'Oh,' said the stranger. 'I never saw you, either.'

But he saw her now, and suddenly the colour started coming back into his face.

'I say,' he said; 'who ——'

'If you can't float better than that,' interrupted Noodles, firmly, 'you've no business to go out of your depth. If those are your clothes over there, you'd better get dressed, I should think.'

The stranger began staggering to his feet.

'But you've saved my life,' he said. 'I must know who you are.'

'Why?' said Noodles.

'So that I can thank you,' said the stranger.

'But you just said it was my fault,' said Noodles.

'No, no, my dear young ——'

'You did. You said I hit you.'

'Oh, surely not. I was only ——'

'Well, I did,' said Noodles. 'But that wasn't what started it. If you'd had the least idea how to float ——'

Whee! went the whistle from the other side of the rocks.

'Sorry,' said Noodles. 'That's for me.'

'What?'

'I must go. Are you all right, do you suppose?'

'Yes, yes,' said the stranger. 'And I can never ——'

'Good-bye, then. I say!'

'Yes?'

'You've got some seaweed on your nose. Yes, that's better. Good-bye.'

It would be quicker, probably, to scramble over the rocks than to return by sea. Yet how often is the longest way round the safest, if not literally the shortest, way home. Noodles took a flying leap from the last rock, and tried to turn back in mid-air.

'Oh, Miss Maplethorpe!' she said, rising quickly to her feet. 'I — I'm most awfully sorry.'

Miss Maplethorpe, who was decently — in a sense

— yet anything but completely attired, showed both surprise and annoyance at this invasion of her private dressing-room.

'Ursula!' she said, at once coldly and heatedly. 'Where have you been?'

'Over there,' said Noodles, waving her arm.

'And why?' asked Miss Maplethorpe, recovering a little more of her dignity.

'Oh,' said Noodles. 'Well, you see . . .'

And she stopped. She wasn't really sure whether she had saved the stranger's life or not, but foresaw with curious accuracy how easily the adventure might be misunderstood. Supposing, for instance, they got hold of the little man, and he repeated his statement that she had hit him.

And, besides, there was no doubt that he oughtn't to have been a man at all.

'Oh, well,' she said; 'I — I wasn't thinking, I suppose. And then I heard the whistle. And so . . .'

Miss Maplethorpe shook her head.

'You mean,' she said, 'that you've been out of bounds.'

'Well, yes. But ——'

'That will do,' said Miss Maplethorpe. 'Miss Mulberry will have to deal with this. You'd better go and get dressed.'

'Oh, but, Miss Maplethorpe ——'

'I can't argue,' said Miss Maplethorpe. 'Please do as I tell you.'

'Oh,' said Noodles. 'All right.'

She turned round and continued her progress with a remarkable loss of elasticity.

'Ursula!' cried Miss Maplethorpe.

'Yes, Miss Maplethorpe?'

'What on earth have you done to the back of your costume? It's in ribbons!'

'Oh, dash!'

'*Ursula!*'

'I mean ——'

But Miss Maplethorpe extended a fat, denunciatory arm as though exorcising the very spirit of evil.

'Now,' she said, very inconsistently and unfairly, 'I really shall tell Miss Mulberry. You make it impossible for me to do anything else.'

So she told Miss Mulberry that Ursula Brett had been disobedient, impertinent, insolent, and immodest, and Miss Mulberry said very well, then, no more bathing for Ursula Brett until further notice.

'You've hurt Miss Maplethorpe's feelings very much,' she said. 'Now, just tell me. What *were* you doing in the next cove?'

'Nothing,' said Noodles obstinately.

'Is that the truth, Ursula?'

'No,' said Noodles insanely.

So instead of being praised by all and given a certificate or even a medal for saving the stupid little man's life, she was excommunicated from the Nature Rambles as well as the bathing, and she was commanded to write out a large number of irregular French verbs, and formed the subject of a long and treacherous letter to Mr. Cottenham.

As, however, Mr. Cottenham never acknowledged this communication by even so much as a postcard, it cannot be said to have made the situation any blacker than it was already.

4

There was a hole in the hedge in the corner of the big

playing-field behind the workshops, and as it overlooked the flinty road which runs up to St. Ethelburga's and the younger of the two Newcliff golf-courses, it was a good hole through which to gaze at the world from which Noodles had now been completely cut off. If anyone saw her lying there, it seemed more than likely that they would forbid even this visual contact with freedom. But on this hot afternoon of the Thursday before Whitsun the risk of discovery was very slight indeed. The junior school were playing games at the other end of the big field. The senior school — minus Noodles — were out on a Nature Ramble in the charge of Miss Kent and Miss Quilter; in other words, they were straggling over the downs and trying hard to talk about anything except birds and plants; and the remainder of the staff were hiding from the stifling heat in the school-building itself. No gardener or groundsman would as Noodles well knew, come poking about here on a Thursday afternoon, because it was early closing day in Newcliff, when they all vanished at one o'clock sharp. So she lay there with her head in the hole, and stared thoughtfully out at the flinty road, and the distant villas, and the still more distant town, and at the bright-blue sea which filled the furthest distance of all. And insects buzzed, and vehicles came dashing past on their way to or from the golf-course, and the white dust swirled and settled again, and a warm breeze hummed gently in the telephone-wires, and the sun blazed away from an absolutely cloudless sky.

'If it wasn't,' said Noodles to herself, 'that it was meant to be a punishment, I must say that I'd far sooner be here than doing one of those awful Rambles. But of course they'll all come back looking as if I'd missed something, and that's the part that one hates.'

She selected a long grass-stalk, and put one end in her mouth.

'The people,' she said to herself, 'who say that it all goes faster when you start getting older haven't the faintest idea what they're talking about. I feel as if this term had lasted for hundreds of years already, and yet I've hardly been back more than a month. I wonder — Hullo! I wonder if that man's going to be killed.'

It was a natural assumption that there was a man in the middle of the appalling noise which was shooting up the flinty road at nearly fifty miles an hour, and it was reasonable to speculate on the destiny of anyone who rode a motor-bicycle with such absolute disregard for everything except speed. 'Horrible,' said Noodles to herself. 'But frightful fun, I expect. That is, unless you go and —— Oh, my hat!'

For no apparent reason, except possibly to demonstrate what a motor-bicycle will stand, the rider had jammed on his brakes, had swerved, had looked over his shoulder, had swerved again, had still further checked his impetus by ploughing up a quantity of the flinty road with his shoes, had swung right round in a swoop that took him clean off the flinty road altogether, and — as the explosions beneath him suddenly died away — could be seen facing the direction in which he had first appeared with an air of calm and pointless triumph. Not that his features were yet visible, for though hatless he was most adequately goggled, but his whole outline seemed to be rejoicing in the memory of that wild and deafening dash and that equally wild and deafening countercheck. 'Yes,' he appeared to be reflecting; 'that's where I was and this is where I am, and my machine's still holding together, and I'm still alive. Splendid!'

He then stepped off the machine, jerked at something so that it stood up without his assistance, untied a small leatherette case from the bracket behind the saddle, crossed the road towards Noodles — who recoiled quickly behind the hedge — and sat down just outside it with his back to her.

'What's he going to do now?' said Noodles to herself. 'I wonder if he's going to have a picnic.'

She crept forward again cautiously, and was again struck by the extreme brilliance of the motor-bicyclist's blazer, and by the extreme, and in the circumstances almost incredible, sleekness of his hair. He had removed his goggles now, and was taking something out of the small leatherette case.

'Oh!' said Noodles to herself. 'Oh, I say!'

For the article which the motor-bicyclist had just carefully removed and was now delicately fondling was the very dead spit and image of her own beloved stringed-instrument which had been reft from her by Miss Maplethorpe on the very first day of the summer term. A pang shot through her so that it was all that she could do not to cry out aloud. But she controlled herself with great difficulty, and the motor-bicyclist — who had now propped a sheet of music against the knees of his flannel trousers — began a painstaking and laborious twang.

Presently he burst into equally painstaking and laborious song.

'"Why,"' he demanded, very slowly and uncertainly, '"does my baby smile at me? Why ——" No, dash it, that's wrong. "Why"' (twang, twang) '"does my baby ——" No, that isn't it, either. Start again. "Why"' (twang, twang) 'No. I mean, "Why . . ."'

It was more than Noodles could stand. Imagine Jack Hylton lurking behind a hedge while a stranger tried to teach himself the saxophone only a yard and a half away. Imagine any skilled performer faced with circumstances like these, and precluded by nothing but a head mistress's embargo from coming to the beginner's assistance. Imagine, also, how far that embargo would prevail, if the skilled performer had been deprived of his or her favourite instrument for more than four weeks. Noodles's conscience gave but one faint squeak, and instantly threw up the sponge.

'I say,' she said, putting her head out of the hole. 'I say!'

The instrumentalist very naturally jumped as if he had been stung.

'Oh!' he said, as his sleek head spun round. And then: 'Oh!'

'*Oh!*' said Noodles.

For she had recognized him as swiftly as he had recognized her. It was the little man whom she had last seen in the English Channel. The little man whom she had dragged from a watery grave, and who had — though unwittingly — gone and got her into all her subsequent trouble.

'Oh!' they both said, again. And then the little man began scrambling to his feet.

'The girl!' he said. 'I've been looking out for you all over the shop. Why did you run away like that? I say, do you live here? I say, this is all right. I say, this is the goods. I say ——'

'Are you all right again?' asked Noodles.

'Oh, rather. It was nothing, really. But you absolutely saved my life.'

'I know,' said Noodles. 'And ——'

She had been about to add: 'And a lot of good it did me afterwards.' Only perhaps this would sound rather rude, and it was nice of him to remember her, and not to remind her how rough she had been.

'And what?' said the little man.

'Nothing,' said Noodles, smiling at him out of the hole in the hedge. 'But he's rather awful, really,' she said to herself; and a cold shudder passes over us as she reaches this very accurate opinion. For though no one seems to be quicker than Noodles at identifying rather awful men when they cross her path, experience suggests that no one is less capable of dealing with them once they have done so. That smile, moreover, gives no hint of anything but amusement and appreciation, and is, of course, devastating in its charm.

'I say,' said the little man; 'you're not laughing at me, are you?'

'Oh, no,' said Noodles. 'I was only just —— I mean, I wasn't doing anything.'

The little man seemed satisfied.

'And you've been here all the time?' he asked. 'Why didn't you let me know?'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you saw the *Newcliff Argus*, didn't you? They had my picture in it.'

'What?' said Noodles. 'Why?'

'They printed the whole story. I've never had such an ad.'

'Such a what? What story?'

'Oh, come!' said the little man. 'You spotted me, didn't you?'

'Yes, of course I did. After you'd taken those goggles off, I mean.'

'Oh, not now,' said the little man, almost im-

patiently. 'I mean, you knew who I was when you rescued me. Didn't you?'

'Well, no,' said Noodles. 'Not exactly.'

'Well, when you saw the *Argus*, then?'

'But I've never seen the *Argus*.'

'But didn't your friends show it you? Do you mean to say . . .' An extraordinary possibility seemed suddenly to present itself to the figure in the blazer. 'Do you mean,' he asked, incredulously, 'that you *still* don't know who I am?'

'I'm most awfully sorry,' said Noodles, politely, 'but ——'

'I'm Lester Vaughan.'

'Oh,' said Noodles.

'You're surprised?'

What was the polite answer to that? Noodles had a sudden inspiration.

'My name's Ursula Brett,' she said.

Mr. Vaughan nodded vaguely.

'Charming,' he said. 'Most extraordinary, though.'

'What do you mean?'

'That you never recognized me. I should have thought when you heard me singing just now . . . Of course I'm a bit raw at the accompaniment still. That's why I came out for a little practice. But it's a pretty number, isn't it? I'll make a big success with it. Not that it's my real line. I'm a comedian, of course, first and foremost.'

'A comedian?' said Noodles, feeling a real thrill at last. 'I say — do you mean that? Do you mean you're an actor?'

'Well, of course. I'm Lester Vaughan.'

'How marvellous!' said Noodles.

Mr. Vaughan felt much more comfortable at once.

'And you were playing like that to be funny?'

'Eh?' said Mr. Vaughan. 'No, you don't understand. That wasn't a humorous number. That was a light one. I'm very versatile, you know. I can do almost everything. That's why I'm so popular.'

'You mean, you really can play better than that when you try?'

'Oh, come!' said Mr. Vaughan, again. 'I only bought this thing the other day. They're tricky affairs, you know.'

'I know,' said Noodles, looking longingly at the stringed-instrument.

'Only exceptionally musical people can play them at all,' said Mr. Vaughan.

Noodles put her hand out and drew it back again.

'Like to try?' said Mr. Vaughan, both humorously and lightly.

'May I really? You see . . .'

'What? Here you are, then. You won't find it so easy, though.'

Noodles had now definitely emerged on the forbidden side of the hedge.

'Thanks awfully,' she said. 'Oh, thanks frightfully. May I have the music, too?'

'What? But you can't ——'

Twang-twanky-twang! went the stringed-instrument. Twang-twankety-twang!

'Oh, I say,' said Mr. Vaughan, under his breath. 'Oh, I ——'

'Go on,' said Noodles, looking up. 'Sing!'

'But ——'

'What's the matter? Am I going too fast?'

'No, no. It's terrific. It's a riot! My aunt, it's the goods! Don't stop!'

'Well, sing, then!'

'Yes, but where do I start?'

'Here,' said Noodles. 'Anywhere. I'll jump in and catch you.'

Mr. Vaughan cleared his throat.

'"Why,"' he again inquired, in a trembling tenor, '"does my baby smile at me? Why does she look so gay? Why does she ——" Here! Steady! I've lost the place.'

'Never mind,' said Noodles, executing three brilliant upward rolls in quick succession. 'Here comes the chorus. Now!'

They sang the chorus as a duet.

'All together!' cried Noodles. And they sang it again.

'Now dance!' shouted Noodles. 'Faster! Oh, that's perfect! Oh, that's *awfully* good! Oh, mind your goggles!'

Crunch. The double turn came to an abrupt conclusion.

'Oh, Mr. Vaughan — are they ruined?'

Mr. Vaughan seized the mangled goggles, and flung them into the road.

'It's Fate!' he exclaimed. 'I knew it as soon as I saw you again. I don't care if you framed the whole thing. You can have any terms you like. In reason, I mean. And don't tell me you're not a pro., because I won't believe it. First you drown me, then you save me, and then you hop out of a hedge and play like a darned specialty act. You knew me all the time, of course, but that's all right. I'm Lester Vaughan. I know what I'm saying. Come back with me now. Rehearse to-morrow. Open Saturday night. My gosh, I'd bill you all over Newcliff if I didn't owe the printer

so much. My gosh, and I thought we were sunk because Maisie had quit. Just the figure, too. Now, then, Miss —— Dash it, I've forgotten your name —'

'Brett,' said Noodles.

'Now, then, Miss Brett, it's a deal, isn't it? Three-pound-ten and all your dresses. What? Four quid, then. What? Yes? My gosh, you've earned it, and what a story for the *Argus!*'

Noodles stared, and stared, and went on staring. The little man's excitement was as contagious as it was mystifying.

'But what do you *mean?*' she asked.

'Business,' snapped Mr. Vaughan. 'Six weeks certain, and the whole season if we can only break even till the big crowds come along. But I'm Lester Vaughan. They eat my stuff down here, and it's nearly June already. Now, then, Miss Brett; for the Lord's sake, don't tell me you're fixed up with an engagement.'

Noodles blushed hotly.

'Of course I'm not,' she said. 'It's absolutely untrue.'

'Splendid!' said Mr. Vaughan, and earned a swift look of gratitude for his ready tact. 'Come on, then.'

'Where?' said Noodles.

'Back to Newcliff,' said Mr. Vaughan. 'I'll give you a lift if you're not afraid.'

'Of course I'm not afraid,' said Noodles.

The music of the stringed-instrument still danced in her ears. She never even heard the school clock striking the half-hour. She looked from the perky, sallow, excited little man with the deep lines in his cheeks to the motor-bicycle which stood there in the thick grass by the roadside.

'This way,' said Mr. Vaughan, dropping the stringed-instrument back into the case, and snapping the catch. 'You'll be all right if you don't let go.'

Yes, but where was he taking her and what did he want her to do? She'd get in the most awful row if she went off like this. She'd probably be expelled.

'Look here,' she said faintly. 'I don't think ——'

'What?' said Mr. Vaughan, swinging round on his saddle. 'What's that?'

He made it practically impossible to answer by plunging suddenly and awakening his machine to the most deafening activity.

'Jump on!' he shouted.

'I can't,' said Noodles, quite inaudibly. 'You don't understand. It's most awfully kind of you, but . . .'

From the tail of her eye she had just caught sight of a disjointed column approaching the flinty road where it curved towards St. Ethelburga's front gates. The Nature Ramblers were returning already, and if she didn't take jolly good care, they'd see her.

Help! They'd seen her. The foremost knot had stopped. They were pointing. They were calling back to the others.

'Look sharp!' bellowed Mr. Vaughan.

Noodles had never looked sharper or reached a quicker decision in her life. She was on that bracket in one bound. Her long legs were dangling in the air. She was clinging to Mr. Vaughan's blazer like grim death.

'Go on!' she screamed. 'Faster! Faster! Faster!'

The wind rushed through her hair as the motor-bicycle sped on its swooping, swerving way. The road went by in giddy streaks. The farm-cart that was overtaken by the cross-roads presented an extraordi-

nary illusion of proceeding backwards. Pedestrians were scattered like chaff. This was the afternoon that they dropped Mrs. Shirley's boiler in the yard of Pippingfold Station, and that Beaky was first seriously beginning to expect an answer to his proposal. But it wasn't until nearly fifteen hours later that Noodles found time to send her brother that astonishing substitute.

'Darling Beaky,' she wrote. 'In case you hear anything I am quite all right and with the most deliteful people so don't get fused [? fussed]. But everything was so Awful after he sent me back their and they even Stopped my swimming. N.B. Not my fault at all! So to come to the real point I have bolted with a cureous little Man — most kind tho' — and he runs a troop of — [*Here various versions of the same word had obviously been tried and rejected until finally Noodles had found one that satisfied her*] — Pierots, and I am going to be one too. Great fun as long as youre not worried and there isn't the slitest need. Dont give me away or I shall be FURIOUS. They have leant me some things and given me a new Toothbrush and they are rather Awful really but most kind. Now I am going off to reherse but do please understand that all this is a *secret* and if you tell anyone I shall NEVER forgive you. It's quite all right I *swear*. Now I must Rush.

'Lots of love

'from

'Noodles

'P.S. But you can tell Snubs if you like as I know he is always to be trusted.'

CHAPTER SEVEN

The situation discussed at Wykeham Street — Introduction to Gertie — Embarkation of the rescue-party — Arrival at Pippingfold — Batty behaviour of Mr. Cottenham.

I

SILENCE in the third-floor sitting-room with the window-seats. Stupefied horror meets the gaze of blank incredulity. The fellow-tenants both seem to be waiting for someone to knock them down with a feather, and to be surprised that no one does it.

Then incredulity gasps and becomes vocal.

'Bolted?' it says. 'Rot. It's a joke, Beaky. It must be one of her jokes.'

Stupefied horror shakes its head.

'No, it isn't,' it says. 'Here — look.'

After a little difficulty the letter is transferred to Snubs's outstretched hand, and he reads it with gradually descending eyebrows. When he comes to the postscript he blinks three times, gulps, and sits on the edge of the table.

'Good Lord!' he adds. 'My absolute hat!'

'It isn't a joke, you see.'

'No.'

'It's the most ghastly thing, in fact. It's the most frightful business.'

'Poor old Noodles. But she hasn't really bolted, of course.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, that's only the way she puts it.'

'Puts what?'

'I mean, the way you said it sounded as if . . .'

Here Snubs decides to cough instead of finishing his sentence. Though his first impression was perfectly intelligible, he is distinctly ashamed of it. Seeking an outlet for his feelings, he suddenly finds it in St. Ethelburga.

'As for the people at that school,' he bursts forth, with the most withering emphasis, 'they ought to be lined up and shot! It's their fault, of course. They're at the bottom of it all. They've been bullying her, I suppose, and now they've gone too far. I say — what are you going to do?'

Beaky doesn't seem to know.

'A pierrot,' he keeps on muttering. 'A pierrot, of all people. I've always hated pierrots. I've never been able to stand them. And now I suppose ——'

'Steady!'

'Well, how'd *you* like a pierrot butting into your family?'

'Shut up!'

The friends glare at each other, but Snubs's glare is much the more powerful.

'Why should I shut up?' demands Beaky. 'She's my sister, isn't she?'

'I know. That's why you ought to stick up for her.'

So far from sticking up for anybody, Beaky groans and collapses into one of the deeply indented armchairs.

'I wish she was *your* sister,' he growls. 'How can I stick up for her when she goes and does this sort of thing? Can't you see it's ruined my absolute last chance? It just puts the cover on everything. It's the most awful shock I've ever had in my life. A pierrot, I mean! Don't you see, if Sylvia hears about this ——'

But the end of this inquiry is blasted by an ear-

splitting interruption from the young gentleman on the table.

'Can't you trust anybody!' he shouts. 'Can't you think of anything but your rotten love-affairs? No — sit down. You can't start fighting in here, or all the Burgesses'll come in. Don't be an ass, Beaky. And don't be a filthy ass.'

Bracing advice, but then Snubs hasn't been waiting two days for a letter that can never come. Perhaps he realizes something of this, for he suddenly apologizes.

'I'm sorry, old man,' he says. 'I know it's all a bit sickening.'

Another groan from the brother and lover in the deeply indented armchair.

'You've no right to call them rotten,' he protests thickly. 'And you needn't talk as if I'd ever cared for anybody else. You don't seem to realize that I might as well hang myself.'

This was going too far.

'All right,' says Snubs. 'Do it, then. There's a perfectly good hook on the bathroom door. Only don't kick the paint.'

'I suppose that's all you worry about.'

'No, of course it isn't. But — I say — Beaky ——'

The jangling emotions of the last five minutes have produced a number of odd exchanges as the old friends bark and snap at each other; but this time, if by pure luck, the note of appeal in Mr. Tipton's voice coincides with the moment when Mr. Brett is just wondering if he hasn't been rather a cad.

'Well?' he says, wretchedly.

'I say — Beaky — what are you going to do?'

'Do? About Noodles, you mean? But what *can* I do? She doesn't even say where she is.'

'I know she doesn't. But the postmark's still Newcliff. I saw it coming up the stairs.'

'You saw it —— Oh, I see what you mean.'

They're getting calmer. They're getting down to business.

'Here it is,' says Snubs, retrieving the tattered envelope from the floor. 'You see? Newcliff. She can't have gone far.'

'Then they've probably caught her by now. Almost bound to, I mean. And if they've done that . . .'

'Well?'

'Then they've probably bunged her back to Pippingfold. I say — what about sending the old boy a telegram?'

'No. You can't do that.'

'In the morning, I mean. I know I can't do it now.'

'You can't do it then, either. Not when she's particularly asked you to keep it to yourself.'

'Oh, can't I?' The calm is suddenly threatened again. 'I've got to do everything she tells me, have I?'

'Yes,' says Snubs.

'What?'

'I said, Yes.'

'Why?'

'Well, would you rather keep it to yourself — if there's a chance of it — or do you want everybody to know?'

The sting in this question lies in the significant pause before the word 'everybody,' and there can be no doubt that Beaky has felt it.

'Oh,' he says thoughtfully. 'Yes. I see what you mean.'

They stare at each other. Snubs suddenly swings forward.

'But,' he resumes, 'there's nothing to stop us going there.'

'To Pippingfold? Why?'

'Don't you see? I could drive you down. Friendly call, and all that. Find out if she's there. Say nothing if she isn't.'

'Um,' says Beaky. 'But the old boy won't say nothing when he sees us. He'll have a fit.'

'He'll have had it already — if he's heard from the school.'

'Um,' says Beaky again. 'But what if he hasn't? I don't see the school making a song about it exactly — if they thought they could get her back.'

'Well, that's all right. Then we'd still say nothing.'

'Funny sort of friendly call, that.'

'Got a better idea?'

'No. What do we do, then?'

'Well, it depends.'

'I see. Gosh, this is a black business, Snubs. I — I'm sorry I said that about Sylvia just now, but — well, *you* know.'

'I know.'

'Perhaps I'll hear from her in the morning.'

'More than likely.'

'Oh, hell. I'm awfully fond of Noodles, you know.'

'Oh, rather.'

'We must get her out of this if we can. Somehow.'

'We've got all Whitsun for it.'

'That's true. Where's that letter gone?'

'Letter? Oh, here it is. I must have shoved it in my pocket.'

'Oh, that's all right. I only didn't want the Burgesses to see it.'

'Oh!'

For some reason Mr. Tipton laughs, but as the discussion goes round and round on the track which it has now marked out for itself, he makes no further attempt to hand the letter back to its real owner. Sometimes his hand creeps into his pocket, and at these moments he invariably opens his mouth to say something, and as invariably coughs or whistles instead. He is on the point, each time, of telling Noodles's brother that Noodles is a sportsman. But in the end he carries this opinion off to bed with him, having kept it entirely to himself.

It is agreed that the rescue-party — or whatever it turns out to be — shall leave Wykeham Street as soon after the first postal delivery as is possible. Out go the lights in the two halves of the old night-nursery. The rescue-party falsifies its own separate predictions by falling fast asleep.

2

There is, and probably always has been, a species of minor prophet who seizes his pen or rises on his hind legs and tells us that mechanical progress is the beginning of the end. If things go on like this, he says, the human race will degenerate into a small group of atrophied slaves attendant on the monsters of its own creation. Look, he says, at this catapult which does the work of a whole cohort. Look, again, at this wireless telephone which dispenses with all other means of communication and brings the whole world to our fireside. Can't we see where all these things are leading us?

So flattering to its ingenuity does the human race find this sort of stuff that it swallows it all with the greatest avidity, and far prefers it to the other kind of

prophet who says that in a few short years all these balloons and steam-engines will transform us into the semblance of gods. It likes, apparently, to be told that its inventions are getting completely out of hand and will be the death of it. When it speaks of the way in which it intends to destroy itself in the next war, it does so with a satisfied and conceited smile, and looks round as though it expected someone to pat it on the back. Call anything 'automatic' when the human race is in this frame of mind, and it will instantly fling overboard all its painfully-acquired knowledge of the relationship between cause and effect. It really strikes us as the most curious sort of race sometimes, and the last sort of race to be trusted with its own future. But then there are plenty of prophets, of course, to come forward and say that it has never been trusted with anything of the kind.

At the moment, however, we are thinking more particularly of its motor-cars, and of its remarkable and obstinate belief in their efficiency. Here is a contrivance which is more temperamental than the most artistic member of the race itself; which is always either being run in or decarbonized; which is always either over-lubricated or under-lubricated; which — as its individual owners well know — will never perform the same duties twice in the same manner, and invariably starts squeaking as soon as you have cured its knock, or drumming as soon as you have dealt with its rattle; bits of which are always working themselves in or wearing themselves out; and the whole of which is a mass of empirical compromise and mutually irreconcilable stresses. Yet so profoundly is the race imbued with this notion that its machines are more practically constructed than itself, that it marches into its garage day

after day, and year after year, with the eternal expectation that this time the car really is going to go like the car of its dreams, or the car of the makers' advertisement.

'I've taken up that lining,' it says to itself. 'I've cleaned out that filter. I've spotted the loose connection that made that funny noise last time. Now, then!'

Away it goes. It listens carefully, with its head on one side. She's pulling like a bird. It smiles contentedly, and lets her out. Instantly the most extraordinary row proceeds from some utterly indefinable source, or what the critics call 'periodic vibration' begins at a speed where it had never begun before, or the feel of the various controls undergoes some subtle and ominous change. A look of baffled resignation spreads over the driver's features, and if he is wise he settles down to make the best of it. But the joy has gone out of his heart and the hope from his soul. He and his friends and the entire technical Press have all lied so often and so convincingly, and he has paid so much more for this model than he can afford, that he simply cannot and will not realize that his experiences are being shared by every other driver on the road. They all believe that everyone else's car is doing what no car can ever do. They all believe that they are dogged by some malignant and personal devil. They all believe everything that they are told, and nothing whatever that they perceive.

And if any surviving pedestrian should doubt all this, then he has only to stand and watch their faces as they come bowling in their thousands along the nearest arterial road. Dull submission is the utmost that he will see there, but the vast majority display melancholy as positive as it is acute. Truly they are the victims of

the machines that they have created; but only because the rotten things are even more uncertain and capricious than they are themselves.

So this brings us back to Snubs Tipton, and the two-seater of which he had been the slave — though anything but the atrophied slave — for nearly three years. That, of course, is a long time to keep a car with two, four or any other number of seats; but then, as Snubs could have told you, there was extraordinarily little of the original vehicle left. With almost human intelligence the original vehicle had started dropping to pieces a week after the expiry of the manufacturers' guarantee, and having continued this process ever since, it was now what is often described — to the fury of pedants — as rather unique. The manufacturers would, in fact, have been hard put to it to recognize their offspring in this synthetic jumble of bits and pieces, encrusted with the remains of innumerable worn-out gadgets, and reduced, by arduous employment, constant exposure and rigid economy in the matter of washing, to the colour of a very old brown-paper parcel.

Nevertheless, and notwithstanding its astonishing unreliability in everything except running up bills, Snubs was absolutely devoted to this strange-looking craft. Over and over again it had done its utmost to break his heart and to kill his affection. It had let him down in circumstances of almost unimaginable inconvenience and ignominy. It had presented him with sprains, scalds, bruises and severe colds; it had attacked him with poison-gas and boiling oil; it had torn his clothes, and had deprived him of the means of buying new ones. Needless to say, also, that it was an expert

in producing those strange and terrifying noises to which we recently referred, and produced them in stranger and more terrifying ways than any other car on the road. But was Snubs cast down? Only until the crisis was surmounted, when he would immediately begin boasting about the two-seater again with every appearance of meaning what he said. 'She wasn't quite herself to-day,' he might admit; 'but, by gosh, you ought to see her when she is.'

Very few witnesses had ever seen her in this condition, and, indeed, it is difficult to understand how she could ever hope to be herself when her identity was subject to such constant and radical revision. But Snubs said that she had character and individuality, which he seemed to think was in her favour. And even when he was too busy to take her out, he would often go and visit her in her garage, and fiddle with her entrails in a well-intentioned manner which hardly ever produced the results that he had expected. He also spoke of her and addressed her by the name of Gertie, and almost the only way in which you could really annoy him was by asking him if he were thinking of selling her.

'Sell Gertie?' he would exclaim. 'After all I've done for her? Why, there isn't a car like her in the whole world. What an extraordinary idea!'

And so it was, when you came to think of it, because who on earth would ever buy a car that wouldn't even obey the man who worshipped it, and that looked like the remains of several fatal accidents, and was the colour of a very old brown-paper parcel? Why, nobody, of course, would dream of buying a car like that.

So while Beaky was still groaning and muttering

after another bootless postal delivery, which had brought nothing but a chatty note from a bookmaker and two letters for Snubs from his parents on their distant island, and while he was still muttering and groaning because of the disgrace which Noodles had brought on the name of Brett by running away from school and associating with a gang of pierrots; while, as we say, the third-floor sitting-room was echoing to these very painful sounds, young Mr. Tipton ran downstairs, and scampered along several streets, and plunged down a cobbled declivity under an archway, and so arrived in the mews where Gertie was waiting for him, and whiling away the time by dripping gently on the garage floor.

''Morning, sir,' said an apparition in greasy overalls. 'Nice morning, sir.'

'Topping,' said Snubs.

'Taking her out, sir?' said the apparition.

'That's the idea,' said Snubs guardedly.

'Right,' said the apparition. 'Jest a minute.'

He then shouted to a lad who looked as if he had been sleeping in an inspection-pit, and the three of them started pushing and pulling and twisting and manœuvring all the other vehicles behind which Gertie was hiding. 'Steady!' they cried. 'Whoa!' 'Other lock, sir.' 'That's it.' 'Right over!' 'Now she'll do it.' 'No, she won't. Back again!' 'Mind that pail!' 'Careful!' And with these and similar phrases they gradually cleared a narrow and tortuous path between Gertie and the doorway.

'Thanks,' said Snubs.

'Can you manage it, sir?'

'I think so,' said Snubs.

He climbed gingerly over Gertie's one practicable

door — because it wasn't so practicable that it would ever stay shut once you had opened it — and Gertie made a horrible noise of grinding and grating, and began to roar and throb so that Snubs shook like a jelly, and more or less vanished in a cloud of extremely mephitic smoke. Under this screen she advanced as far as the entrance, where Snubs's voice could be heard calling for petrol.

'How much, sir?' asked the apparition, coughing and wiping its eyes.

Snubs leapt over the door again, raised the bonnet — which did its best to fall back and cut his hand off — raised it a second time with greater success, unscrewed the filler cap, squinted into the orifice, extracted a piece of knotted string from a hole in the dash, lowered it carefully into the tank, and announced that he could do with five gallons.

'Leaking a bit still, isn't she, sir?' said the apparition.

'Nothing to worry about,' said Snubs loyally. 'Five, I said.'

Gertie then received about four and three-quarter gallons in her tank, and the balance anywhere that it happened to go.

'Oil?' suggested the apparition.

'Not from the look of things,' said Snubs. 'But I could do with some water.'

'Fred!' shouted the apparition. 'Can!'

But Snubs poured the water in himself, because a curious enlargement of the overflow pipe made this a matter of some technical skill.

'You ought to have that seen to, sir,' said the apparition, watching the puddle that spread and trickled towards the grating.

'Oh, she's all right once she warms up,' said Snubs. 'Nothing to worry about.'

The apparition suddenly crouched down and stared penetratingly through Gertie's off-side front wheel.

'I don't like the look of that rod,' he said.

'Don't you?' said Snubs. 'Never mind.'

'Beg pardon, sir?'

'Thanks,' said Snubs, edging the apparition out of the way. He closed the bonnet again, secured it with a large elastic band where the catch had broken, and climbed back over the door. The apparition and the boy Fred stood clear with their wrists on their hips, and waited with interest while Snubs wound his legs in under the steering-wheel.

'Now, then,' he said. And then: 'Oh, I say!'

'Sir?'

'Don't worry if I'm not back for a night or two. I'm not quite certain how far I'm going.'

The apparition and the boy Fred exchanged humorous and significant grins.

'No, sir?' said the former. 'Well ——'

But Snubs wasn't going to sit there and hear cheap and obvious jokes being made about his adored Gertie. He jerked forward suddenly, so that his chin very nearly hit the wind-screen, and once more the smoke-cloud poured from the exhaust and up through the floor-boards while the mews echoed and reëchoed to a sound which, for some unaccountable reason, was music in his ears. Looking very stern and masterful, he crawled over the cobblestones, accelerated past a dust-bin, shot up the rise under the archway, touched a button which produced a noise like a chorus of lost souls, and with a loud slap achieved top-speed and the macadam of the public thoroughfare. Anxious as he

still was about the events which this day might yet bring, he couldn't help feeling a deep joy and satisfaction at being once more reunited with Gertie. He sang to her as she chewed up the perspective of Wykeham Street. If only she could finish the day as she had just started it, he didn't mind if he chased Noodles all over England.

Then he stamped on the brake, and Gertie pulled up before the broad steps of Number Ninety-Seven.

3

'Of course,' Beaky was saying to himself, upstairs, 'even registered letters must get lost sometimes. Perhaps that's what happened. Perhaps the postman went wrong suddenly. Or dropped it without noticing. Or perhaps that butler took it in and then forgot about it. I mean, surely she wouldn't just not answer at all. I couldn't possibly believe she'd do a thing like that . . .'

But the fact remained that she hadn't answered.

'Perhaps she's ill,' said Beaky to himself, and was suddenly so terrified by this possibility that he had to cling for support to the back of a chair. Oh, Lord — to think of Sylvia being ill. In pain, perhaps. In agony. And his clumsy, blundering letter coming to worry her just when she ought to be having absolute peace and quiet. Of course she'd loathe him after that. Well, naturally. Or perhaps she was so ill that her mother had had to open and read the letter, and in that case . . .

Or perhaps she wasn't ill at all.

Supposing, now — here was an idea — he rang up Dolphin Street, and didn't say who he was, but just asked ——

No. The impracticability of this half-formed plan drove him away from the telephone long before he had reached it. For supposing — among many other destructive objections — that she answered the summons herself. That wouldn't be the sort of situation that one could deal with, would it?

How'd it be, then, if he wrote another letter — just saying that he'd written to her about something and he didn't know if she'd ever got it because he couldn't help thinking perhaps she hadn't and in that case . . . In that case, what?

No, again. Very decidedly no. And this time, though he had actually started looking for the fatal writing-pad, he swung off again and began wondering if, after all, the Shirleys had gone down to Pippingfold earlier than they had said. If they'd done that — and of course it would be just like Mrs. Shirley if they had — then perhaps they had said, Don't forward any letters, and in that case . . .

Pippingfold, though. Why had the thought of Pippingfold suddenly paralysed this careful chain of reasoning, and oppressed him with a fresh and different kind of anxiety? Something to do with Mr. Cottenham, was it? Oh, of course. Dash! This business about Noodles.

That was a rotten idea of Snubs's, to go careering off to Pippingfold and say nothing when you got there. What they really ought to have done, of course, was to have rung up St. Ethelburga's last night, and to have found out if they'd got any news or what they were doing about it all. Then you'd have known where you were. Then you'd have known what to do next. Only of course they'd have said, 'Who told you?' and if you answered that, it meant giving

Noodles away just when she'd asked you not to. Not that she'd any right not to be given away, when she'd gone and done a thing like this; but — well, one couldn't have Snubs looking at one as if one were a cad. If Snubs were so dashed honourable, then of course one had got to be honourable too. Even about one's sister.

'But,' said Beaky to himself, as he roamed the space between the table and the window, 'there's no doubt that this is going to be the most awful sort of Whitsun — whatever happens. There's no doubt whatever that there *is* a curse on my family. And of course if anything really happened to Noodles . . .'

Even to himself, apparently, young Mr. Brett couldn't admit that in an odd, queer, basic sort of way his affection for his sister Ursula touched portions of his soul which were at least as deep as those stirred by Miss Sylvia Shirley. Even to himself, apparently, he had to try and explain this fact away.

'I mean,' he went on, 'that when one's always known somebody, and they've been through it with one, and they're so absolutely *hopeless* at looking after themselves, and they *will* see nothing but good in everybody — well, I mean ——'

But here he was spared the discomfort of further analysis by the irruption from without of a familiar sound resembling a chorus of lost souls. He sprang to the nearer window-seat, and extruded his head.

'Hullo!' he bawled. 'Hullo, Snubs!'

'Here we are!' yelled Snubs, referring presumably to Gertie and himself. 'Buck up, you old blighter!'

The faces of a number of wayfarers swung round to follow any further exchanges in this stentorian dialogue, but the head at the third-floor window had

already vanished. In less than a minute — and it would have been quicker still but for an encounter with Miss Burgess on the second-floor landing, who had as usual been quite unable to decide whether to pass on the left or the right — it reappeared in company with its body and remaining limbs, and carrying a small, brown suitcase.

'Right,' shouted Snubs. 'Chuck it in. Nothing like pyjamas in an emergency.'

The suitcase bounced into the dickey, and came to rest among Gertie's jack and an old inner tube and the remains of what had once been her side-curtains, and Mr. Brett climbed over the door on to the vacant half of the front seat.

'Just a moment,' said Snubs. 'You've got the leg of your bags over the brake-handle. Ah — that's better. Now, then.'

After three attempts, each of which sounded as though a quantity of scrap-iron were being flung about in a gigantic churn, he succeeded in getting the gear-lever into first, and Gertie leapt forward as if she had been kicked. 'That's all right,' said Snubs, repeating the noise with variations. And then slap! and Gertie was in top, and sailing up Wykeham Street, and sailing round the corner, and sailing round another corner, and sailing by within a few yards of her garage, and so threading her way with many crashes and squeaks and with a gradually diminishing trail of blue smoke through the early-morning traffic that was already trundling up and down the long-suffering streets of the capital.

Presently there was a bridge, and then there were tram-lines, and then the capital became greener and greener with the foliage that it would so soon have

deluged with dust and soot. And then the road soared over a long hill by itself and came down again into a no man's land that was neither town nor country, but was densely populated by inhabitants with tennis-racquets. And then it shook these off and wound away among frequent appeals on the part of landowners to dispose of their property as eligible building-sites. And the queue of southward-bound vehicles through which Sylvia and her mother had flashed yesterday afternoon was as nothing to the rushing, roaring queue in which Gertie was now embedded. And where there had been a hundred suitcases on Friday, there seemed to be a thousand suitcases now. And the patrols mopped their faces and saluted until they were dizzy. And the great motor-coaches came thundering along with music and perspiration. And hot, angry men whose off-side tyres had burst skipped about and shook their fists at the vast stream that swept by within an inch of their running-boards. And scribes in London were already preparing to announce that this was the Biggest Exodus on Record, and wishing for some extraordinary reason that they were in it. And more thousands were rushing through their Saturday morning work so that they could make it bigger still at the first possible moment. And the late Mr. William Cobbett, who had ridden this way more than a hundred years ago and had been annoyed by meeting a solitary gig containing stock-jobbers on their way to the great Wen, looked down on this amazing scene and suddenly wondered if his contemporaries were quite as objectionable as he had declared. A remarkable spectacle, in short; but the great point was that Gertie was still firing like a pippin.

'I say, Snubs.'

'Hullo?'

'Look here, I mean . . .'

'Well?'

'Could you put me down when we get near the village? You see ——'

'Why?'

'Well, it just struck me ——'

'What? I can't hear you.'

'Well, it's rather important, you see. I mean, if I have a sort of squint at Mrs. Shirley's house, then I'd prob'ly know whether they're there or not. And ——'

'You want to call there?'

'Oh, no! Oh, Lord, no. Oh, no. No, of course not. Well, not this morning, anyhow. In fact ——'

'All right,' said Snubs. 'You don't want me to squint too, do you?'

'No, no. You go on, and I'll cut across the fields. I'll be there prac'ly as soon as ——'

'Oh, I say.'

'What?'

'Talking of letters — I forgot to tell you.'

'What? What do you mean?'

'My governor this morning. Heard from him, you know. Clean out of my head.'

Gertie's liveliness on a stretch of pot-holes accounted for a certain Jingle-esque quality in Snubs's speech which made him rather difficult to follow.

'What?' said Beaky again. 'What's that?'

'Who do you think turned up there the other day? Relation of yours. Said so, at least. Governor rather took to her. Mother too.'

'Relation of mine?' said Beaky. 'Haven't got any.'

'Said she was, anyway. Funny thing to lie about. Mrs. Something. Forgotten the name. In my pocket, though. Oh, yes!'

'What?'

'Some kind of fish. Hake? No. Halibut? No.'

'Here, I say ——'

'Think of some more. I'll get it in a second.'

'What the dickens ——'

'Ah — got it! Not a fish at all. Stupid. Name was Millet. Mrs. Millet. Eh?'

'Great Scot! Aunt Caroline.'

'There you are. Aunt. What did I say?'

'But I haven't seen her for ages. Centuries, I mean.'

'Can't help that,' said Snubs, and as the pot-holes died away, his speech became practically normal. 'My governor said you were digging with me, and she got quite excited. Wanted to know all about Noodles, too. Would have it that you were both about thirteen. Nice woman, they both said, but a bit mad. Does nothing but travel and take snapshots.'

'That's her,' said Beaky. 'That's Aunt Caroline all right. Millet ran away from her and dropped down dead. Not a bad chap, though. He gave me an air-gun once. What a rum thing.'

'That's what I thought,' said Snubs.

'Funny, I mean.'

'Yes.'

Idle and kindly reflections on Caroline Millet, her restless present and her turbulent past, accompanied the two-seater for quite a number of miles. Snubs wondered if she were at all like Noodles. Beaky wondered what sort of a show he had made when reconstructed from scraps of Snubs's letters. They both felt rather sorry for her, for some reason, and sorry for Millet, too, who had run away from her and dropped down dead. Things that had happened a long time ago

like that often seemed sadder than things that happened just now; except, of course, when they happened to yourself. Relations, also, are so much more romantic when you never see them. 'Rum,' they both thought. 'Queer business. Odd sort of life.' And suddenly Gertie began slowing down.

'Anything wrong?' asked Beaky, roused by the change of key.

'No,' said Snubs. 'But we turn off here somewhere, don't we?'

The exodus began sweeping past them, hooting and tooting as it swept. Beaky looked round for recognizable landmarks.

'That's the place,' he announced. 'At that fork there. We go to the left.'

'Right.' Jerk. Crunch. Crash. Crunch, again. Slap! The exodus roared away to the right, as the great Carter had roared yesterday afternoon, and Gertie swooped off where the signpost said, 'Packley and Nibfield.'

'It's straight on,' said Beaky, 'till you come to a sort of place that I can't describe. But I'll tell you when we're getting near. There's a pond with an old water-cart in it.'

A most useless place for a water-cart, though the picture seems vaguely familiar as a rural glimpse. Snubs nodded an acknowledgment of the information, and Gertie continued to charge the vista of white road and thick hedges and flashes of bright blossom. Packley came dashing towards them, and dashed away behind them, giving the impression as it did so that its principal industries consisted of education and burial. Nibfield had apparently vanished from the map, or else had been overcome with modesty, for the

next signpost said 'Kingsbourne 4 miles.' A little later another, and more punctilious, signpost pointed in the same direction, and said 'Kingsbourne 4¾ miles' — but motorists with any experience have long ceased to wonder at such freaks of relativity, and Gertie forged steadily ahead.

'Here we are!' shouted Beaky. 'There's the pond. Next turning on the right. Just past that —— Yes, that's it.'

Uphill now. Downhill again. Through a nameless hamlet which might possibly be Nibfield after all. Principal industries, Teas Provided and — judging by the rich scent — cows kept. If not pigs.

Another sharp rise, this time leading to cross-roads. As usual, the signpost here made it comparatively easy to distinguish any destination except that which lay straight ahead. But as Gertie screeched and shot past it, both driver and passenger caught the same word from the tails of their respective eyes.

'Pippingfold.'

4

Now it was as though our heroic ancestors had foreseen the coming of motor-traffic, and had done all that they could to prepare for it. The road wound insanely between high banks and hedges, dipped sharply in one acute bend, and rose confusingly in another. Narrowed, also, especially at those points where its intentions seemed more particularly open to doubt; and developed a curious granulated surface which kept Gertie darting from side to side in the effort to spare her tyres. A later generation had planted a number of red triangles on metal stems at odd and irrelevant intervals — more, it would seem, as propitiatory

emblems than with any considered reference to the lie of the land. Sometimes they alarmed you by peeping out of the undergrowth just when you thought that the danger had temporarily abated; or again they had been so placed that you only saw them, and were distracted by them, even as the danger was at its height. Occasionally they warned you of something so obvious that you looked wildly about for further perils, and in doing so became an additional peril yourself.

But Gertie's horn, and still more the constant enmeshment and disengagement of her various gears, advertised her access as unmistakably as though she had been preceded by a man with a red flag. Moreover, the winding lane was as empty on this Whit-Saturday morning as at any other date or hour that you might choose to select; and so, presently, the travellers arrived at the spot where Noodles had once fallen off the parlourmaid's bicycle, and without a single collision or narrow escape to be added to Gertie's score.

'That's better,' said Snubs, preparing to rush the long rise ahead of them.

'Steady!' shouted Beaky.

'What?'

'On the right here. Whoa! You're going past it!'

'No, I'm not,' said Snubs, vibrating violently owing to the necessity of holding the gear-lever into position with his knee. 'It's another half —— Oh, sorry. I'd forgotten.'

There was no doubt that Gertie could stop when she was going uphill as well as most cars. She did so; began to roll backwards; and stopped again.

'But what are you going to do?' asked Snubs.

Beaky didn't quite know.

'Well,' he said, disentangling his legs and starting to climb out; 'it rather depends, you see. But if they *were* there ——'

'Who? The Shirleys?'

Beaky blenched.

'Well, yes, of course. I mean, if they *are* there, then — well, I'd know where they are. Don't you see?'

'Are you going to ring and ask?'

'Good Lord, no. Only going to — well . . .'

'What?'

'But I don't suppose they are. They wouldn't be, I mean. Not with luck like mine.'

There was more than a hint here that this luck was being challenged to prove the speaker wrong. But Snubs must have misinterpreted the tone.

'If you're as certain as all that,' he said, 'it hardly seems worth it. Or are you going to ask where they've gone?'

'Good Lord, no. Don't you see I can't possibly do anything when I don't know whether she's had my letter or not? Only if they *are* there . . .'

It was apparent that this sentence would never be finished, and Snubs felt at liberty to go ahead.

'What do you want me to do?' he asked. 'Wait?'

'Good Lord, no. Supposing they came along the road and spotted me getting in again. Just think what it would look like!'

Snubs thought, but couldn't see it.

'What do you mean?' he asked.

'Well, it would look exactly as if I'd come down here to try and squint at them. Do use your head a bit.'

'Oh,' said Snubs. If squinting, when used in this context, signified spying, then as far as he could make out this was precisely what his old friend was propos-

ing to do. And if only the tenderest and most insupportable of passions hadn't been involved, not lightly would even his old friend have been suffered to submit that advice about his head. But we have remarked that Snubs Tipton was a philosopher.

'Oh,' he repeated. 'Well, what *do* you want me to do?'

'Quite simple,' said Beaky. 'I'll just dodge up the drive, and beetle about a bit, and see if the place looks inhabited — without going too close, of course — and then I'll nip across the fields and meet you.'

'Where?'

'At the Manor House, of course. Say in ten minutes.'

'It now being . . .'

They both looked at their watches.

'Twenty to twelve,' said Snubs.

'Half-past eleven,' said Beaky. 'But that's not the point. In ten minutes, anyhow. Outside the front door. And what we're going to say to the old boy, Heaven only knows; but for Heaven's sake, don't be late, or Heaven only . . .'

He kept glancing up and down the deserted road, in obvious terror lest the Shirleys or their butler should spring out on him.

'Well,' he suddenly added. 'Ten minutes.'

And he was gone. The dodging and beetling implied, apparently, that he couldn't even approach Green Hatches by the conventional drive. He must have detected that little gap in the hedge while his eyes roved and his tongue babbled, for he had stooped and shot through it like a denizen of the jungle.

'Beaky! I say!'

A crashing sound in the undergrowth.

'Shut up, you dashed idiot!' said a muffled voice. 'Shut up, and go away!'

So the philosopher left it at that, and Gertie began roaring up the hill again, and from the top beheld Pippingfold village straggling down towards the level crossing; but cared not two cotter- or gudgeon-pins whether the gates were closed or open, for her way lay off to the right. A few hundred yards of twisting and turning, and the roof of the Manor House appeared through the trees.

'Steady,' said Snubs, suiting the action to the word. And Gertie drew to a standstill.

It was remarkably hot and fine, and Snubs lit a cigarette.

Yes, remarkably hot and fine. Almost too hot, in fact, sitting here in the sun, and with Gertie's engine only a few inches from one's shins. Let's see; what's the time? Thirteen minutes to twelve. In three minutes, then, Beaky should be along. Outside the front door, he had said, but if he came across the field one wouldn't see him until he popped round the corner of the house. Just a little awkward — especially if he were at all unpunctual — because so many windows looked down on that gravel sweep, and visitors, as Snubs well knew, were natural objects of suspicion. Lucky, he thought, as he swung himself out on to the hot roadway, that Mr. Cottenham didn't keep a dog.

He looked at his watch again.

Better make a move.

For the second time that morning, and in that peaceful rural district, a young gentleman began creeping through the grounds of a private residence in a distinctly furtive manner. The drive itself was again avoided, because of its crunching characteristics and

its dangerous lack of cover, but by moving from tree to tree, and from bush to bush, Mr. Tipton had in a very short time attained the protection of the laurel behind which Noodles had once hidden from the unspeakable Fitzgibbon. He threw his cigarette down, stamped on it, and passed his handkerchief across his forehead.

So far, he seemed to be considering, so good. But where was Beaky?

He peered cautiously from his retreat, beheld an open front door, a quantity of open windows, and nothing else.

Late, of course. He would be. It was absurd to think that ten minutes were long enough for what he had set himself, but it was equally absurd to suppose that Snubs could remain here in the blazing sun, with all these insects buzzing round him, and still preserve the calm necessary for the forthcoming interview.

In London that interview had seemed simple enough. In London one had toyed with Mr. Cottenham, as befitted the son and heir of a Colonial Governor, drawing information from him in a series of swift, cunning questions, and revealing nothing whatever in return. But at Pippingfold, and in Mr. Cottenham's own garden — well, perhaps it wasn't going to be quite so simple after all.

The handkerchief again; and another cautious glance at the deserted gravel sweep.

It was different, of course, for Beaky, because Noodles was his sister. Beaky would have every justification for putting swift questions, without bothering whether they were cunning or not. But then whose idea was it that had brought them here? And how much help was Beaky going to be with an old boy who invariably afflicted him with aphasia?

Not much, thought Snubs, looking at his watch again, and noting that it was now exactly noon. 'If only she were *my* sister . . .' he added. But the thought seemed impertinent, and for some reason slightly revolting. He dismissed it impatiently, but found nothing useful to take its place.

Poor old Noodles . . .

He peeped out again, giddily and uncertainly because of this frightful heat. There was nothing to be seen. But — Hullo, there was something to be heard. Voices — or at any rate a voice — proceeding from that open window on the ground floor. A rapid architectural calculation. Mr. Cottenham's study.

'Good Lord,' said Snubs. 'They're at it. Beaky must have slipped in when I wasn't looking, and —— By Jove, what ought I to do?'

Fly to his friend's assistance? Go on hiding and doing nothing? Butt into another family's family scene, or skulk outside though it was entirely his own creation?

'Awkward,' said Snubs again, as he crept unconsciously into the open. The third alternative of eavesdropping at the open window had certainly not suggested itself to his honourable soul, but as certainly it would be forced on him if he continued on his present course.

'All done to annoy me,' came the querulous tones from the open window. 'More trouble. More expense! Where's it all going to ——'

The third alternative was shattered before it had a chance to blight Mr. Tipton's stainless record. You couldn't possibly call it eavesdropping when the alleged eavesdropper had just tripped over a pair of garden-shears, and saved himself by plunging right

across the flower-bed and seizing hold of the window-sill itself.

'I — I beg your pardon, sir,' he gasped.

Mr. Cottenham came sailing towards him, waving him back.

'What the devil!' he retorted, dancing with surprise and irritation. 'Who the devil are you? What the devil do you think —— Great Jupiter, it's young Tipton! What the blazes do you want? Eh? Go away!'

'I'm awfully sorry, sir, if I ——'

'Eh? Go away, go away! I don't know what you're doing here, but I'm busy. I'm working. Can't you see I'm in my study?'

Undoubtedly Snubs could see that, but in vain did he peer past the infuriated inmate for signs of his fellow-tenant.

'I'm terribly sorry, sir, but I had an idea that Beaky ——'

'What? What? Reginald, you mean? What about him?'

'Well, sir, I thought . . .'

But clearly he had been mistaken. Clearly Beaky was still sauntering along the field-path — and might arrive at any moment to add fuel to this unfortunate situation. Perhaps the thought had better be kept to himself.

'Well, well?' snapped Mr. Cottenham. 'What's the matter? Has Reginald run away too?'

'Oh, no,' said Snubs, but much illuminated by that last word. 'Oh, rather not. No, he's all right, sir. In fact ——'

'Well, I'm not,' said Mr. Cottenham. 'People telegraphing, and writing letters, and asking questions, and popping up in the garden. It's enough to wear

anyone's nerves to shreds. What's it got to do with *them?* I tell you, England's no place for a decent citizen. Giving votes to girls, and all that. Worrying me morning, noon and night. First this, and then that. Bah! What do *you* want?'

This speech, which was accompanied by a great deal of violent but quite unintelligible gesticulation, struck Mr. Tipton as more comprehensive than clear. What, for instance, had the extension of the franchise to do with it all, and why had people been telegraphing and writing letters? And had other people, as well as himself, been popping up in the garden? Yet the last, explosive question had been extraordinarily direct.

'Oh,' said Snubs, politely. 'Well, you see, sir ——'

'I don't see!' shouted Mr. Cottenham, in a frenzy. 'Either it's my business, or it isn't. Either I'm responsible, or I'm not. If they want to start plaguing me now, why didn't they say anything before? I'm not a lawyer. I've got no head for figures. I've never pretended I had. Very well, then. They can sue me if they like, and a lot of good it'll do them. You go and tell 'em that. They'll find it damned expensive, but that's their lookout. I've had enough of this place, I tell you. I'm going abroad.'

What on earth was he talking about?

'Abroad?' echoed Snubs. 'But who ——'

'Yes,' interrupted Mr. Cottenham. 'I'm going where people don't come brawling outside other people's windows when they're trying to have a little peace. Do you want me to say it again?'

Would it be any clearer or more relevant if he said it a hundred times?

'No, rather not,' said Snubs courteously. 'That's quite all right, Mr. Cottenham. Only I — that's to say we were just wondering — I mean ——'

'Eh?'

'About Noodles, I mean. Has she ——'

Mr. Cottenham closed his eyes, and flung out his arms.

'I won't have it!' he said. 'They come worrying me, and I tell them I won't have it. I wash my hands. Do you see, my boy? I wash my hands of the whole business from start to finish and from A to Z. That's my answer. You can't have it both ways, and I don't care if you seize the furniture. Is that perfectly clear? Very well, then. Get out!'

'But I say, sir ——'

'Get out! Go back and tell Reginald I'm going abroad. Tell him I voted for Gladstone, but I'm not going to stay here and be pestered by every upstart jackanapes with his own axe to grind. No, not you, my boy — don't keep jumping like that. I'm only giving you a perfectly straightforward message. And as for Ursula — well . . .'

'Yes, sir?'

'I don't know where she is, and I don't care. Miss Mulberry keeps telling me she's run away with a motorist. "We've found his goggles," she keeps saying. What's the use of that? "Shall we call in the police?" she asks. What's it got to do with me? "Shall I come and see you?" she telegraphs. God forbid! By the way, it wasn't you, was it?'

Mr. Cottenham leant confidentially out of the window, and Snubs took a step backward.

'What wasn't me, sir?' he asked.

'The motorist, of course. You've got a car, haven't you? I know you brought it here once, and made a devilish noise in my yard. Eh?'

'Oh, no, sir.'

'You did! Don't contradict me.'

'I mean, of course it wasn't me. I — that's to say Beaky and I — we only just heard that Noodles — that Ursula, that is ——'

'Blah!' said Mr. Cottenham, returning suddenly to his original state of fury. 'Go away, then. Get off my flower-bed, and don't stand there cross-questioning me. Go back to the spies who sent you, and tell 'em that I deny everything. Everything, do you see? I'm preparing a statement that'll explain it all, and I'm going abroad, and I will *not* be interrupted by ——'

Bang! The window descended with a crash that interrupted Mr. Cottenham far more effectively than any human agency could have done, or than Snubs would ever have dreamt of doing. For a moment he was still visible through the panes, pushing and thrusting in the direction of his caller as though he would force the very atmosphere to drive him further away. Then he vanished into the darkness of the study, and the caller was left staring at nothing at all.

'My hat!' he muttered, stumbling over the garden-shears again, but this time recovering himself without external assistance. 'What on earth was he gassing about? Lawyers? Spies? Going abroad? He must have gone clean off his ——'

A low whistle swung him round to another point of the compass.

'I say! I say, Snubs!'

It was Beaky, peering out from behind that invaluable laurel-bush. Snubs ran to meet him, making warning signals as he did so.

'Well?' he asked.

'They weren't there, old man. I got right up to the side door, but there wasn't any sign of life at all. Then

some fellows with a lorry and big boiler on it came bumping along, and I had to clear out. I got absolutely winded, trying to dodge them. I say, am I late?'

'A bit,' said Snubs. 'It's all over, anyhow.'

'What do you mean? Why didn't you wait for me?'

'I thought you'd got here first. I thought I heard him talking to you. But he was alone really, and he spotted me, and — well, if you ask me, he's gone potty.'

'Ratty, you mean?'

'No. At least ratty, if you like, but batty as well. I can't tell you what he didn't say.'

But two negatives make an affirmative, and the extraordinary interview was immediately reënacted.

'Gosh!' said Beaky. 'A motorist, did he say? But that's another story altogether. Didn't he explain at all?'

'No,' said Snubs. 'Would you like to go in and ask him?'

'No, thanks. Not if he's in that sort of mood. Besides — Snubs, I'm worried to death over this business. Where do you suppose she is?'

'Noodles?'

'No. I mean, yes, of course. But ——'

Snubs Tipton took his old friend by the arm, and began leading him down the drive.

'There's only one thing to do,' he announced firmly.

'What's that? Where are you taking me?'

'Back to Gertie, of course. We've got to get to the bottom of this. And there's only one place where we can hope to do that. We'll be there in another hour.'

'Where?'

'Newcliff,' said Snubs.

'What, the school?'

'Yes.'

'I bet they won't tell you anything.'

'I shan't ask them,' said Snubs. 'I'm not her brother.'

With this defiant, significant and unanswerable statement, he ran forward and leapt skilfully over Gertie's side to his old position at the steering-wheel.

'Buck up, Beaky,' he added.

The missing heroine's brother looked regretfully at her old home, and even more regretfully and gloomily, perhaps, at a vision beyond it of that last, useless link with the adorable Miss Shirley; and even more dismally and desperately still at a blank future which was to be yet further blasted by a very embarrassing audience with an unknown head mistress. Then, slowly and silently, he grasped a corner of the wind-screen, and levered himself on to the ancient upholstery. A protesting squeak from coachwork and springs, and once more the self-starter was whirring, and the engine was roaring, and the clouds of smoke were filling the hot, narrow lane.

A large puddle of oil, of an exquisite iridescence, might be taken as representing Gertie's visiting-card. But Gertie herself had gone.

Mr. Cottenham was packing clumsily but compendiously in a series of extremely disreputable trunks. Every now and then he pulled one or other of two crumpled letters from his pockets, and glared at them, and snorted at them, and remarked that he'd nothing to say to anyone, and that it was all a trumped-up piece of blackmail and insolence. But it did really look, for all the angry muttering and querulous self-justification, as though he were shaking the dust of his ungrateful country off his objectionable shoes at last.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Noodles is still missing — A nearer view of the Diamond Dominoes — A rehearsal at the Pavilion Chalet — Miss Mulberry gets no further — Disadvantages of life among the pierrots.

I

A STRAIGHT tip to those readers who may be in hiding from their friends, enemies, relatives, gaolers, creditors, or editors emerges significantly and helpfully from the history of Noodles Brett. Forget, says this tip, that you *are* in hiding, that the hunters are on your trail, that your appearance and description are well known to them, and that at any moment you may feel their hot breath on the back of your neck or their heavy hands on your shoulder. Just go right ahead with whatever you happen to be doing, without a thought of the snares that they may be setting for you, and ten to one this will so stultify their ingenuity that they will never find you at all.

We don't pretend that Noodles had deliberately adopted this policy, for deliberation was no part of her mental equipment. An impulse had sent her flying away from St. Ethelburga's on the carrier of a rather awful stranger's motor-bicycle; another impulse had prompted her to write a vague communication on the subject to her only brother in London. But having gone so far, it never seems to have occurred to her that Miss Mulberry would start telegraphing to Pippingfold, or would rush round Newcliff making mysterious and non-committal inquiries at the railway-station and elsewhere, or would examine the scene of her escape so closely as to discover and theorize upon Mr. Lester

Vaughan's shattered goggles. If she had seen Miss Mulberry or any of her recognizable scouts marching down the street towards her, she would probably have done her best to avoid them — for it was obvious that by doing so she would also avoid a lot of tiresome explanation. But as luck would have it, she didn't run across them in this way, nor did they run across her; and in the general excitement of learning what Mr. Vaughan had planned for her, it was extraordinarily easy to forget that such a place as her recent prison still existed.

After all, when once you have left school as definitely as Noodles had appeared to leave it a couple of months ago, when once you have definitely grown up, a state of freedom is surely the natural state to be in. You can't keep bothering about rules and regulations from which you have been specifically released, and if your conscience suggests that you should, then your soul — for once — is likely to brush its feeble remonstrances aside.

'They ought to be pleased, if anything,' said Noodles to herself. 'Because they won't have to keep me in order any more, and they won't have to feed me or to look after me, either. In fact, I should think they'd be just as pleased as I am, and really it looks to me as if I'd been cleverer than I thought.'

A mist spread over the red bricks and green fields of St. Ethelburga's up there on the hill, for of course one didn't go on thinking of a life that one had enjoyed so little. And a burst of sunlight seemed to illumine both the present and the future, as Noodles realized that she was independent and self-supporting, and that for once an apparently rash act had brought nothing but relief and satisfaction to everybody concerned.

Three-pound-ten a week and a real job on the almost real stage! It was the most marvellous thing that had ever happened. No wonder that Miss Brett's eyes shone and her feet kept breaking into rhythmic expression of her joy, and that she laughed whenever any of her new friends spoke to her.

Because really, you know, they were most terribly amusing and most terribly kind. Yes, of course they were also rather awful, but what a much better sort of awfulness than that, for instance, exhibited by Miss Maplethorpe or Mr. Cottenham. Another mist was fast spreading over Pippingfold and the ghastly experiences of that frightful Easter holiday, but if one thing were absolutely certain — and here, as it happens, Noodles seems to have hit on the truth — it was that Mr. Cottenham wouldn't really care what she did, so long as she left him alone, and didn't ask him for money, and kept both their names out of any further adventures.

Again Providence obliged in the most surprising and unexpected manner. We have mentioned — or, rather, Mr. Vaughan has mentioned — a little difficulty which he had had with the printers who supplied his programmes and billing matter; a difficulty not wholly unconnected with his attempts to offer them free seats in exchange for their services, and with their inability to see eye to eye with him on this unusual system of barter. We have also learnt from him that a certain domino — briefly referred to as Maisie — had left the talented troupe with more haste than consideration, and that Noodles was to take her place.

Add these two facts together — and disregard the details of professional acrimony which had led to this sudden retirement — and anyone should be able to see

where Mr. Vaughan's thoughts would lead him. On the one hand a supply of posters and programmes large enough to last the entire season. On the other hand an unknown addition to the company, whose previous experience, incredible as it appeared, had been entirely among amateurs. On supernumerary hands the opportunity of exasperating an artiste who was already, in all probability, regretting her high-handed, not to say upstage, behaviour; and the convenient fact that — at any rate during the first part of the programme — the dominoes all justified their title by appearing in little masks. To a quick and mercurial mind like that of Lester Vaughan, the deduction from these premises stuck out a mile.

'Listen,' he said — as he was always saying. 'I'm giving you a new name, Miss Brett. All right? Yes, fine. That's great.'

Noodles looked a little doubtful — but only because she hadn't quite understood.

'A new name? Me?'

'Yes. Listen. I'm billing you as "Maisie Dolores." See? Business reasons. Important, in fact.'

He pulled a face which was meant to indicate the weight of managerial responsibility, and Noodles began to laugh.

'Eh? What's the joke, Miss Brett?'

'Oh, nothing. I say — must it be "Maisie"? I've always rather ——'

'Yes, yes. Essential. Now, don't let's waste time. You want to get on, don't you? Very well; that's the way to help. "Maisie Dolores — Just a Comédienne." Doesn't matter what you do, then. Look — there it is.'

They were walking towards the Pavilion Chalet from the lodgings where Noodles had spent the night, and

where she had just breakfasted with the two female dominoes who shared them — plain women, but awfully kind — and no doubt it was a definite sensation to see one's name, even though it wasn't one's name, pasted on a barrel at the base of some scaffolding like that.

'I say,' said Noodles. 'You *have* been quick.'

'Not bad,' said Mr. Vaughan, with a look of pleasure which may have been partly due to the fact that advertising of this nature — 'sniping' is, we believe, the technical term for it — added nothing to his overhead charges. 'I don't let the grass grow under my feet, you know. This way, Miss Brett. Round here.'

It would have been sickening for him if one had mentioned one's dislike for the name 'Maisie' after he had taken all this trouble. Besides, did one really want to see one's legitimate name emblazoned on end-walls and empty houses all over Newcliff? No; quite apart from the disadvantage of such publicity in its effect on Miss Mulberry, it seems that in her heart of hearts Noodles was still some way from qualifying as a true professional. She did not want to see Ursula Brett billed with Lester Vaughan and Dan Colyer and Nellie Selbrook and the other Diamond Dominoes. She wasn't naturally self-conscious, and most certainly she wasn't a snob, but it was a distinct relief to find that this threat had vanished as soon as, or even sooner than, it had appeared. Maisie Dolores; she must try and remember that. It was rather awful, but it could quite easily have been much worse.

So she swung round the corner of Fish Street without a thought that by doing so she had just escaped running smack into Miss Mulberry herself — on her way to make those mysterious and non-committal inquiries to which we have previously referred — and she con-

tinued to accompany Mr. Vaughan on his rather exhaustingly rapid progress through the little alleys and by-ways of the Old Town, until the spectacle of one of those pale-pink pillar-boxes to which the best air on the south coast had reduced the official scarlet suddenly reminded her of something else.

'Oh, Mr. Vaughan — I say!'

'Yes, yes?'

'I wonder if you could possibly lend me a stamp. Just one, I mean.'

'Eh?'

'For this letter, I mean.'

'Ha!' said Mr. Vaughan.

Was he a cold-blooded manager at this moment, who would feel bound to refuse this unbusinesslike request; or a rollicking Bohemian who would reply that he only wished he had got such a thing, and why not make them pay at the other end? Or was he a still-youngish and not ill-natured individual who had been approached for a loan of three halfpence by a remarkably pretty girl? Having practiced the appropriate faces for the two former rôles, he suddenly realized that it was the third in which he could really do himself justice.

'A stamp, Miss Brett? Certainly. Why not? What's a stamp between friends? Eh? Why, nothing. Nothing at all. Delighted to oblige.'

And he stopped, and pulled out a pocket-book which was almost bursting with the press-cuttings from which he was never separated, and made the face of a benevolent but slightly harassed millionaire searching for a document of international importance, and clicked his tongue as though he were astonished at the number of rare and interesting papers which he was carrying about, and thus eventually produced no less

than three stamps — one of which he detached with an air of scrupulous accuracy, and offered to his companion as if no other could possibly serve her purpose.

'Shall I stick it on for you?' he added politely.

'Oh, no, thank you. I can do it, Mr. Vaughan.'

'I see.' A trace of the cold-blooded manager returned. 'A penny-halfpenny, then. I'll chalk it up, if you don't mind — with the rest. Got to keep my accounts straight, you know, Miss Brett. What? Right you are.'

He chalked it up on the back of an envelope, in addition to the advance of ten shillings on her first week's salary which Miss Brett had so gratefully accepted in lieu of a contract last night, and smiled generously, and repocketed his wallet, and forged ahead. And Noodles thanked him profusely, and stamped the letter which was addressed to R. H. Brett, Esq., at Number Ninety-Seven, Wykeham Street; and posted it in the pale-pink pillar-box; and ran on down a little nameless lane at the back of a public garage just as Miss Mulberry crossed the far end to ask at the main entrance if anybody could identify those goggles. But they didn't see each other, and so far we find no reason to be sorry that they didn't.

It was at about this time that Sylvia Shirley set out for that walk in London on which she and her friends were to create such disturbance in the souls of eye-witnesses aged over thirty. And it was quite as fine here as it was there.

2

Perhaps it was because of the blazing sun outside, and that cloudless blue sky, and those gentle zephyrs which barely fluttered the bunting over the entrance

to the Pavilion Chalet, that its interior struck Noodles Brett as so particularly squalid and drab. 'This way,' Mr. Vaughan had said, plunging into what looked like a bathing-hut clapped against the end of the tin hall. 'Mind your head. Mind these steps.' And they were on a dusty platform, surrounded by dusty hangings, and furnished with some ancient bent-wood chairs and an extremely battered piano. Below them, and stretching away through a perspective which was fitfully illuminated with dusty shafts of sunlight, were rows and rows of more bent-wood chairs, all facing towards Noodles and her guide. And as her eyes grew used to this semi-obscurity, and as she also realized that she was now actually on the stage — and wondered why she didn't feel more thrilled about it — a number of human figures became gradually visible, and appeared to be converging on her own end of the hall.

'Who are those?' she asked, in a respectful whisper — for undoubtedly there was something about this place suggesting a chapel that had seen better days. But though Lester Vaughan didn't hear her, he was already answering her question.

''Morning, Dan,' he said. ''Morning, Harry. That you, Mac? Sorry I'm late. Still, here's Miss Brett, and we may as well get started. I'll introduce you, Miss Brett. This is Mr. Colyer. You'll have some numbers with him. And ——'

'How do you do?' said Noodles.

'Charming,' said Mr. Colyer, wringing her hand warmly. 'Are you ——'

'And this is Mr. Kilburn. Here — Harry!'

'Oh, how do you do?' said Noodles.

'Grand,' said Mr. Kilburn, in a bass of such surprising profundity that Noodles nearly jumped out of her skin. 'You're joining us? How fortunate.'

He also wrung her warmly by the hand, and bowed as well — revealing a most ingenious disposition of dyed hair over a bald patch. Noodles found the spectacle at once fascinating and — as she described it to herself — 'putting-off.' But he seemed sad, and she felt rather sorry for him.

'Thanks awfully,' she said.

'One more,' said Lester Vaughan. 'This is Mr. Mackworth. Mac's our pianist, you know, and, oh, boy, he can sure tickle the ivories!'

Nothing could have been less like an American than this supposed imitation, and Noodles blushed as sympathetically and uncomfortably as if the failure had been her own. But the men laughed, the imitator himself loudest of all, so she imagined that they didn't know how bad it was. Later, when she had had the opportunity of hearing Mr. Vaughan deliver a monologue in the character of an Irish Jarvey — whatever that was — she felt that perhaps she had been hard on his American. But at the time she was truly thankful for the imperfect lighting.

'How do?' said Mr. Mackworth, more like a comedian than a pianist. 'Any relaish of Billy Brett? You know — Brett and Brewer. Lancashire comics. Met 'em up at Blackpool two years ago. Eh?'

'I'm afraid not,' said Noodles. 'At least, I don't think so.'

Because she couldn't be absolutely positive. After all, most people have relations that they've never heard of, and it would be rather thrilling, in a way, to have a distant cousin who was a Lancashire comic. Though, of course, distinctly unlikely.

Mr. Mackworth seemed to think it distinctly unlikely too. He shook his head. He looked extremely

gloomy. He pulled his chin into his fat neck, still shaking it from side to side. He hiccuped.

'Pardon,' he said.

Noodles smiled angelically, but decided that Mr. Mackworth wasn't her favourite. What were they all going to do next?

Nobody seemed to know. Mr. Vaughan was telling a long, rambling story about his motor-bicycle, but with actions which appeared to have been borrowed from a fishing anecdote. Noodles couldn't follow it. Mr. Kilburn had struck the attitude of a listener, but clearly wasn't listening. Mr. Colyer was prowling up and down and muttering. It was very difficult to keep out of his way, because he never seemed to stick to any definite track, or to notice where it was taking him. Mr. Mackworth, still ruminating despondently over Brett and Brewer, had sunk on to one of the bent-wood chairs. His soul one might imagine to be at Blackpool. Without it his body was not an object on which anyone could wish to feast their eyes.

'I wonder what they're all waiting for,' said Noodles to herself. She didn't quite like to sit on another bent-wood chair, in case it should turn out that they were waiting for her. Also, she was still feeling very nervous; not because any of these sad-looking men were in the least frightening in themselves, but because she was expecting at any moment to be asked to play or sing to them. Decidedly she would be glad when the ordeal of this rehearsal was over; but so far it showed no sign of even beginning.

She realized that they were all looking at her. That Mr. Colyer had stopped prowling, that Mr. Mackworth's soul had returned from Blackpool, that Mr. Kilburn was watching her closely, and that Mr. Vaughan was talking about her.

'Of course,' he was saying. 'That's what I told you last night. I told you it was the same girl. You ask Miss Brett, if you don't believe me. Didn't you, Miss Brett? Eh? Wasn't it you who pulled me out of the water?'

'Oh,' said Noodles. 'Well, yes. I mean ——'

'There you are!' interrupted Mr. Vaughan, brushing her aside. 'Queer, isn't it? But that's not the point. The point is, how can I use the story if I can't scrap the bills? No good giving Maisie the credit, you know. Now, haven't you boys any ideas?'

Apparently not, though they could, and did, all talk round and about this peculiar problem with steadily increasing obscurity. The 'she' who formed such a large part of the dialogue was obviously Noodles herself — or at any rate most of the time — but none of them ever spoke to her directly, or seemed aware that she was alive and present. At first she had been afraid that her adventure on the bathing-beach was to be revived and incorporated in the performance, but the danger — if it had ever existed — appeared to pass. The argument became more and more professional and remote. Each character in turn would start a story of what he or someone else had done in quite different circumstances at Bognor, or Margate, or places that she had never heard of. But they seemed incapable of listening to each other, or of keeping to their own subject even on the rare occasions when they weren't being interrupted. It all sounded like some extraordinary game which had been played so often that its original objects had been forgotten. The only rule which still kept it going was that on no account must anyone talk of anything but how successful they had been at some other place where they had been associated with someone else.

Their actual words were often extremely offensive, but it was clear — in some odd way — that they were all enjoying the game far too much to abandon it for the sake of taking offence. And if they had abandoned it, it was also clear that they would begin again at once, because they had nothing else to talk about. And because they'd got to talk, or they would be swept away in a vacuum which would destroy their strange illusion that they were real people, and really existed.

'I feel far older than any of them,' thought Noodles; 'and yet they're not in the least like children. They're more like something that someone had started inventing, and then left off in the middle. They sound happy, but they don't look it. They talk about the audiences as if they hated them, but they can't really, or they'd all be doing something else. Only one can't imagine them doing anything else. I wonder what on earth they all do in the winter, when the places like this are shut.'

But we doubt if anyone knows the answer to that question; least of all these unsubstantial creatures themselves, whose flimsy memories preserve nothing but the record of previous materializations in Pavilion Chalets, and Kursaals, and Grand Grottoes. All we can say is that Noodles shows little sign so far of becoming unreal herself, or of appreciating the Lotus-Fruit which is being so carelessly offered for her consumption. She is still determined to do anything that they ask her, to sing, twang or dance, to learn whatever she is given to learn and to come and go wherever she is bidden. She is still most honourably anxious to repay that ten shillings and a penny-halfpenny, to discharge the bill at her lodgings, and with these objects

in view to take orders from any domino who will give them.

But the utmost that has happened by one o'clock — when the rehearsal is adjourned until after lunch — is that Mr. Vaughan has had a frightful scene with a man who has disturbed him by entering the body of the hall to collect a case of empty beer-bottles. He has addressed that man, and the man has cringed before him, as though the incident had taken place in the middle of a performance of Parsifal at Covent Garden — instead of in a shoddy shanty where a group of idlers are doing nothing at all. Otherwise the time has slipped away in talk and cigarettes; in reminiscence and anecdote; in imitation and detraction; but mostly in sheer, indescribable, dawdling indolence.

'Don't they ever do anything?' Noodles has asked herself, as she waits and waits and waits. But she doesn't like to ask the sad-looking men, for she is so conscious of her inexperience. And she doesn't like to ask Miss Nellie Selbrook and Miss Mimi La Touche — her fellow-lodgers, who have come drifting in with vague excuses for their unpunctuality in which no one seems interested — because although they are awfully kind, she has already discovered that they never listen to you. Their eyes always seem to be wandering in search of a looking-glass, whether a looking-glass is there or not. Their minds seem always to be fixed on an invisible and slightly harassing future. One doesn't feel, somehow, that they have any better idea why this rehearsal has been called, or when it is going to begin, than one has oneself. And they, also, like the sad-looking men, seem lulled and drugged by the mere immanence of the Pavilion Chalet — as though it is enough for them to be breathing the stuffy atmosphere

and to be surrounded by the dusty stage-fittings, whether there is a performance going on or not.

So presently Mr. Vaughan says: 'Well, three o'clock sharp, then, and we'll run through the stuff again' — exactly as though they had run through it already. And with an air of swaggering self-consciousness the male dominoes put their hats on at the same rakish angle, and the female dominoes pick up their flamboyant hand-bags, and they all come chattering forth into the bright sunlight — just a little surprised, you might imagine, not to find a crowd waiting to cheer them — and they shout to each other, and laugh unnaturally, and disband.

And Noodles accompanies Mesdemoiselles Selbrook and La Touche back to the furnished lodgings, where they lunch untidily off sardines, pickles and cheese, and collapse into two separate trances on the only two comfortable chairs — though still muttering occasionally about Llandudno, or Yarmouth, or Bude. St. Ethelburga's still seems extraordinarily far away, but does anything else seem very much nearer?

We may feel that Noodles is safe enough, so far, in this queer, ghostly company, but we don't feel somehow that it is quite the company that we should have chosen for her. It is a relief to know that her letter is already well on the way to Wykeham Street, and that — thanks to Snubs — the start of the rescue-party is not more than eighteen hours away.

3

Miss Mulberry found two remarkably lukewarm and unhelpful telegrams from Mr. Cottenham on her return to her antiseptic study, nor had her cautious investigations produced anything but bewilderment in

the minds of several railway-porters, hotel-porters and garage-foremen. For the honour of the school she couldn't bring herself to say, 'An extremely good-looking pupil has run away with a wholly unaccountable stranger,' but even if she had taken this frank and dangerous line, she hadn't applied anywhere where Noodles and the chief domino had impressed their respective personalities. The clue of the goggles brought her nowhere, and there were no other clues at all.

So Miss Mulberry groaned, and cursed the day when she had so weakly readmitted Ursula Brett to the fold. And then groaned again, and reproached herself for looking at it so selfishly. And sent another telegram to Mr. Cottenham reporting the complete absence of progress in language which she hoped would puzzle the Post Office, and only failed to puzzle the recipient because he tore it up as soon as he had read the signature. And having done all this, she summoned Miss Maplethorpe and Miss Kent, and her secretary Miss Thrush, and rearranged the entire educational programme for Friday afternoon so as to permit of their absence, and sent them forth to pick up the trail where she had already so very thoroughly confused it. And sighed, and took up her ordinary burden — which was not made any lighter by the whispering of many-tongued Rumour, which no amount of discipline could check.

Noodles had run off and married a cricketer, said many-tongued Rumour — basing this report on a glimpse of Mr. Vaughan's blazer. Or the cricketer was really her long-lost uncle. Or he was a film-actor — no one knew why, but there was something very fetching about this notion. Or she had really been expelled,

but for something so awful that nobody could mention it. Or she had been recaptured, and was immured on bread-and-water in the head-gardener's cottage. Or — a hopeful idea, this — she had contracted an infectious disease of such appalling virulence that nothing would serve but to rush her off to the isolation hospital, or to a well-known specialist, on the first motor-bicycle that came along. In that case the whole school would probably be closed, and everybody would be sent home. Hurrah for Noodles, a martyr in the cause of liberty.

But authority remained silent and, for obvious reasons, unquestioned. No bulletins were posted, no dramatic statement was issued at evening prayers. And Rumour, destroying itself by its own excesses, began to subside. Miss Mulberry, trained to recognize the symptoms by years of subtle divination, realized that the worst — so far as the remaining pupils were concerned — was now over, and planned a supreme Nature-Ramble for Saturday afternoon as a final exorcism or counter-irritant.

But the two mistresses and the secretary had reported nothing. Though they had been far less concerned with the honour of the school, and though Miss Maplethorpe in particular had even exceeded her instructions by going round with a photographic group in which Noodles featured in an aggregation of hockey-players; and though they had all gone past the Pavilion Chalet, and two of them had been seen, and avoided, by Noodles herself, not a trace of evidence could they produce.

'She must have left the town,' they said. 'Can't her guardian suggest anything?'

'Thank you,' said the invincible Miss Mulberry. 'I'm dealing with that.'

She bowed them out of the antiseptic study, and hoped and prayed for the best. But she would not have been human if she hadn't, during the past twenty-four hours, succeeded in transferring an increasing load of responsibility on to the said guardian's unhelpful shoulders. Who had sent Ursula back to St. Ethelburga's? Who had done nothing at all but transmit extremely discourteous telegrams? Who, presumably, knew something of Ursula's non-scholastic friends, and if he would only take a little trouble could say which of them would be likely to turn up on a motor-bicycle and carry her off? And who, on the other hand, had ninety-six other girls to look after, and practically twice that number of parents to take them away if this duty were forgotten?

'What more can I do?' demanded the head mistress of her pale green walls. 'I've offered to go and see him, and he hasn't even answered. All I know is that if he tries to send her back again, I won't have her. Unless, of course . . .'

But this is weakness. Remember the ninety-six. Remember the half-yearly balance-sheet. Remember the sacred torch. No Ursula can fit into that scheme again, however innocent her eyes or graceful her outline; however much she may haunt this antiseptic study in the semblance of one weeping over a volume of Lord Tennyson's poems.

Miss Mulberry shakes her head, and replaces her spectacles, and returns to the daily grind. St. Ethelburga's picks up the rhythm of its endless activity. Upstairs in her bedroom Miss Maplethorpe is staring at a stringed-instrument, only one of whose strings has survived its imprisonment in the cupboard next to the hot-water pipes. Does Miss Maplethorpe, then,

typify Hope? We should say not, judging by her expression. We are glad to report that Miss Maplethorpe is looking both gloomy and conscience-stricken.

'We drove her to it,' she mutters; and though 'we' clearly means 'I,' and 'it' bears no definable meaning at all, one may yet read into this confession a sincere and welcome note of remorse. Perhaps Noodles is a martyr after all, for we don't think, somehow, that Miss Maplethorpe will go bagging stringed-instruments or banning the bathing-beach in quite such a hurry next time. That is, if there is ever another Noodles to give her a second chance.

4

Meanwhile the original Noodles is still suspended uncomfortably on the brink of her professional career. The afternoon rehearsal had proved even vaguer and more footling than the one in the morning. Nothing that could possibly be described as a quorum of dominoes had been raked together until nearly four o'clock, and even then nobody had seemed to know or care how the proceedings should be conducted. The whole company — except Mr. Mackworth and Miss Selbrook, who never turned up at all — complained of extreme exhaustion, which in truth appeared to have affected every power except that of ceaseless, aimless conversation. After all, they had scrambled through the show last night without their alleged comédienne, so presumably they could scramble through it again. Besides, Friday was always a rotten house, and must therefore, one gathered, expect a rotten entertainment. Besides, again, they couldn't do anything without the pianist. But principally they were all so set and hardened in their own individual turns — and the

ensembles were just a noise that they roared through anyhow — that they couldn't seriously imagine that Noodles needed anything more than to be dressed and made-up and pushed through the dusty curtains at the right moment, when of course she would do whatever it was that Lester had engaged her for. Why tire themselves, then, by repeating stuff which they all knew in their sleep? Call it a rehearsal, by all means, because there was something matey and mystic about these gatherings in the deserted Pavilion Chalet; something which kept them alive and preserved the flattering belief that they worked far harder than anybody in a shop or an office; and something which killed time far more swiftly and satisfactorily than wandering about the town and waiting for it to be eight o'clock. But don't let's carry the thing to the length of singing songs or giving recitations which had done very well without private repolishing for the past five, ten or fifteen years. Let's bore the public, whom we hate and despise, but don't, for Heaven's sake, let's bore ourselves or each other.

So again Noodles sits and waits, and nobody asks her to do anything else. And again the Diamond Dominoes gossip and wrangle, and boast about imaginary triumphs elsewhere. And smoke cigarettes, and fling the stubs into the sand-buckets in the wings. And emit hollow or eldritch laughter at nothing at all. And occasionally start being very confidential with Noodles, only to lose the thread and wander away while she is still wondering what they are talking about. The men call her 'dear' now, and Miss La Touche calls her 'dearie,' but in such a distant, automatic manner that it never occurs to her to resent it. She doesn't exactly like it, and she doesn't exactly like

the dominoes quite as much as she thought she did when she wrote to Beaky this morning. But there's no getting away from it; they do obviously mean to be most awfully kind. And one simply can't help feeling awfully sorry for them.

'I suppose they'll explain a bit more later on,' says Noodles, at the meal in the lodgings which follows the imperceptible disintegration of the afternoon rehearsal. 'Do you think they'll show me what I'm to do to-morrow?'

But Miss Selbrook has a better idea than answering queer questions from this queer, though apparently harmless, girl that Lester has picked up.

'Can you sew at all, dearie?' she asks. 'Not anything fancy, I don't mean.'

'Oh, yes. I've done quite a lot.'

'That's fine,' says Miss Selbrook. 'I can't stick it myself, and here's this nightie come back absolutely in pieces, and I do like to have nice things always. Now, how'd it be if you borrowed a work-bag from the girl and took it along to the show to-night? That's an idea, don't you think?'

So from shortly after eight until nearly half-past ten, Noodles Brett sat in the wings of the Pavilion Chalet repairing the ravages of Miss Selbrook's — and Miss La Touche's — undergarments. There was a gap in the dusty hangings immediately opposite her, and through it she could hear and see the Diamond Dominoes yelling and stamping and bawling and thumping the battered piano. Sometimes there was a hideous sound of laughter from further away, or a feeble burst of Friday-night applause. In the hot glare of the electric lights the performers looked fantastic and dis-

gusting, and never for an instant did they do anything which the seamstress could honestly acknowledge to be either funny, or clever, or ingenious, or making the slightest sympathetic appeal to the human eye or the human ear. Fortunately, however, none of them asked her what she thought of it. As they came off the stage they generally told the first colleague with whom they collided how damned good they had just been, and added an opprobrious epithet to describe their enemies the audience. And just before they went on, they would often pull a frightful face at the same enemies from behind the dusty hangings, changing instantly as they bounded through them to a forced and horrible smile. But Noodles, apparently, in her present stage of development, was neither in one camp nor the other. Not even a benevolent neutral, it would seem, or at any rate not one in whose opinion either side was interested. She could hardly have felt more invisible or superfluous in the dining-room at Pippingfold.

But she finished her sewing, and the Diamond Dominoes finished their entertainment, and the enemies trooped off into the night, and the lights were turned down. The victors — for it is perhaps fair so to describe those who remained in possession of the field — were very noisy as they scrambled into their ordinary clothes again in the stuffy little dens that existed for this purpose. They shouted to each other, and kept borrowing matches and towels and something called 'the opener.' They sang vociferously. They conducted conversations at the tops of their voices even when they were sharing the same den, and they had a great deal to say about what they were going to have for supper, and what they had had for supper at Southsea, or Scarborough, or Weston-super-Mare. But there

were also a number of esoteric jokes — mostly, it seemed, of a personal nature — which no outsider could hope to understand. As, for instance, when Mr. Colyer suddenly bellowed, 'What about the cucumber?' and Mesdemoiselles Selbrook and La Touche laughed so piercingly that it sounded as though they were being tortured.

At one point Lester Vaughan burst from his particular den in a pair of trousers and a singlet, and with a face that glistened like a tongue in aspic; and seeing Noodles still patiently waiting there, said 'Hullo, kid,' in such a friendly manner that she quite hoped that he was going to add something definite about her duties at last.

'Hullo,' she said, jumping up eagerly.

'All right. Don't you move. Getting on all right? Fine!'

He turned away.

'Mr. Vaughan!'

'Yes, dear?'

'When are you going to ——'

'What? Now, don't worry me now; there's a good girl. All this hanging about costs money, you know. Pounds, shillings, and pence. Besides, I've got to get off early to-morrow. Got to go and see a pal at Croydon. We're writing a play together.'

'Oh, are you really?'

'Yes. Damned fine story, too. At least, it will be if we can only fix the last two acts. Quite original, what's more. Got a scene that's going to absolutely knock 'em. A scream. A yell. The real goods.'

'Oh, how splendid! But, I say — Mr. Vaughan —'

'Some other time, dear. Now, don't you worry.'

'Yes, I know, but ——'

A hoarse cry from one of the dens.

'Lester, old man! Where's the opener?'

Mr. Vaughan had vanished, and Noodles hardly liked to pursue him while he was dressed like that. She sat down again, feeling baffled and anxious. Feeling very sleepy, too. And increasingly conscious that whatever happened she could never be a Diamond Domino in spirit. One had to be born like that, she supposed, and if one wasn't . . .

A vision of three beds flickered before her weary eyes. In her room at Pippingfold; in her cubicle at St. Ethelburga's; under the sloping roof where she had slept last night. She would never see two of them again, and — oh, dear — she didn't at all want to see the third. If only ——

But no. Be firm, Noodles. Swallow that lump, and remember that you've burnt your boats. Of course these people can't really mean you never to do anything at all. And of course you can't dream of leaving them when you've nowhere else to go, and are running up a bill at those awful lodgings.

So Noodles controls herself, though she can no longer control her yawns. And presently Mesdemoiselles Selbrook and La Touche pop out of their den in hats and mackintoshes, and they all go back to a supper of tinned salmon and more pickles and stale cake and more tea. Rather fun? Well, not really. But they are still kind, though they talk more and more to each other, and less and less to the queer girl.

Eventually the queer girl slips off to the knobbly bed under the sloping roof. 'It can't really go on like this for ever,' is the thought which lulls her at length to a sleep of utter exhaustion. And most sincerely and whole-heartedly do we hope that the prophecy may prove to be correct.

CHAPTER NINE

Sylvia at the Majestic — A strange telephone conversation — Misadventures on Wissingfield Common — The rescue-party reaches Newcliff — Miss Mulberry's quiet afternoon — Farewell to St. Ethelburga.

I

SYLVIA spent the morning walking up and down the front, or resting on portions of it and gazing at the hypnotic twinkle of a myriad miniature wavelets. So did Noodles, but it wasn't written that they should meet. Sylvia had a paper-bag full of peppermint bull's-eyes, but Noodles had resisted the very powerful impulse to a similar purchase, because — after buying the absolute minimum of equipment and toilet accessories — she had got only sevenpence left. And it would be a whole week, she had gathered, before she could hope to receive the balance of her still unearned salary.

But they both thought of Beaky a good deal, and Noodles thought of Snubs as well, and wondered if he would be ashamed of her if he knew what she had done. She didn't mind what other people thought — not even her brother, because practically none of these things would have happened if only he had sent those gramophone records to Pippingfold; but Snubs had always treated her with respect, and it would be terrible if he found that he couldn't do so any longer. Moreover, there were a solidity and stolidity about Snubs that were infinitely comforting when one compared them with the absence of these qualities among the Diamond Dominoes. He didn't always quite understand what one meant — and, if it came to that, one

didn't always express oneself so that anyone could — but at least he listened and was serious and did his best.

But the Dominoes never understood, and scarcely ever attempted to listen. So far as she could now learn — for apparently Mr. Vaughan had come round again last night, revivified by his own supper, after she had gone to bed — she was to take her place on the boards to-night without any preparation at all. She was to wear one of the dresses, and to sit on one of the bent-wood chairs, and to try and join in the choruses whether she knew them or not. And, worse still, she was to accompany Mr. Vaughan in his rendering of the ballad which he certainly hadn't known on Thursday afternoon, and so far as she was aware hadn't looked at since.

And he had gone to Croydon — and didn't expect to be back until just before the show — with the stringed-instrument still attached to the back of his motor-bicycle. She knew this, because of course she had rushed round to his lodgings to try and borrow it.

But all Miss La Touche had said was: 'Don't keep worrying, dearie. He'll pull you through.'

And all Miss Selbrook had done was to tell a story about how she had once learnt twenty pages of script in three hours, and had gone right on and knocked them all silly. Quite meaningless and quite irrelevant, and not even said in a particularly nice or sympathetic sort of voice. She had also sniffed and glanced at Miss La Touche, and added that some people wanted to run before they could walk.

'Walk on, you mean,' Miss La Touche had replied, thus provoking screams of merriment from her colleague which had made Noodles escape as quickly as

she could into the open air. She didn't really know whether they had been laughing at her or not, but in either case it was quite obvious that they wouldn't miss her. They had drawn their own salaries last night, and could think of little else but shopping.

So Noodles walked up and down, and longed for peppermint bull's-eyes. And it grew hotter and hotter, and the shade grew less and less, and the only places where the Newcliff Corporation would let you sit without paying twopence, or sometimes even threepence, were in the full glare of the sun. But if she couldn't buy herself bull's-eyes, still less could she waste so much of her capital on a deck-chair either with or without an alleged awning which made it only slightly less dangerous than the guillotine. On the other hand, if she walked any further, she would drop. So she went back to the lodgings — feeling a reasonable hope they they would be emptier and less smelly than when she had set out; and it was at just about the same time, namely shortly after noon, that Sylvia found even her threepenny seat in the shade becoming a little too uncomfortable to be borne; and looked at her watch; and stretched herself; and decided that she ought to go back to the Majestic Hotel to see what Mummie was up to.

Strictly speaking, Mummie wasn't up to anything, for she was still in bed. Perfectly well, thank you, and perfectly presentable — indeed, looking quite her best — but following a long-established precedent which gave over the first morning in any new place to a great peace and calm and absence of movement. To meditation, perhaps, but one could never be sure of this. At any rate to a determined tranquillity which no amount of fine weather outside could disturb.

That wouldn't be all that would disturb us, if we tried to spend the whole morning in bed at an hotel. Chambermaids would come bumping and clattering in, and go bumping and clattering out; and a window-cleaner would whistle outside on the balcony; and the people in the next room would play their portable gramophone, or shriek madly over their packing and unpacking. We have little doubt, either, that in our case the electric bell-board for an entire floor would be just outside the door, and that a vacuum-cleaner would howl and whine up and down the corridor, and the water-pipes would have been so arranged as to gurgle and pant and roar all round us whenever anybody else in the hotel turned a tap either on or off. Probably, also, this would be the morning when one of the under-porters polished the hydrant which was just under the bell-board, and kept dropping bits of it, and clanking them together, and singing lustily as he did so. And someone would have left a door open, and the wind would alternately come howling through it or slam it ferociously without ever engaging the latch. Also the people overhead would be picking the furniture up and flinging it down again, and the jug on our washstand would rattle sympathetically each time that this happened.

But then, as we said before, we have never been and can never hope to be a Mrs. Shirley, and perhaps when you are as fond of hotels as she was they reward you with a different kind of treatment from that which the rest of us get. And in any case when Sylvia re-entered her mother's bedroom, she found her looking extremely peaceful and comfortable, and they smiled at each other, and if you will believe us there wasn't even a broom leaning against the end of the bed, or a dustpan on the seat of the large armchair.

'Well, darling?' they said.

'I've been out,' said Sylvia. 'It's marvellous. How are you feeling, darling?'

'Much better,' said Mrs. Shirley, and as she had never complained of feeling worse, this seemed a most excellent state of affairs.

'You wouldn't like a bull's-eye, I suppose?'

'No, thank you. Did I give you that hat?'

'Yes, darling. Do you like it?'

'Yes. And much better down here than in London.'

This seemed a most admirable state of affairs, too; and Sylvia sat down on the foot of the bed.

'I'm so glad,' she said. 'Do you think you'll get up for lunch?'

'Oh, yes. There's plenty of time, isn't there?'

'Oh, rather, but I was wondering . . . About Noodles, I mean.'

'Noodles?'

'Now, Mummie!'

A warning forefinger cautioned Mrs. Shirley against being Mummieish again, and again they both smiled.

'For lunch, you mean?' said Mrs. Shirley. 'Yes, certainly. Why not ring up the school, and we'll send Carter.'

'All right,' said Sylvia, and she slipped off the foot of the bed, and picked up the telephone-directory from the table by the head.

'It's called "St. Ethelburga's,"' she murmured. 'I wonder where that would come. Oh, dear; it's one of those books that's all in different little chunks. Why *will* they do it?'

'Never mind, darling. Just ask them, and they'll get it for you downstairs.'

'That's an idea,' said Sylvia appreciatively. And

she put down the directory, and picked up the telephone, and asked for St. Ethelburga's School. And although the operator was a woman, she liked Sylvia's voice so much that she found the number for her without telling her to make a note of it, please; and there were some clicks and crackles to show that she was getting it as fast as she could.

'I wonder if they'll let me speak to her,' thought Sylvia, with the receiver against her ear, and her eyes thinking how nice and pink her mother looked. 'I wonder who answers one at a school. I do hope they'll let her come . . .'

There was a rushing sound, and a female voice.

'St. Ethelburga's. Yes?'

Sylvia's first question having already been answered by this model subscriber, she found that she wasn't quite ready with her second.

'Oh,' she said. 'I see. Well, look here . . .'

'Yes? Who is it, please?'

'Well, we wanted to know if —— I mean, could I speak to a girl, or send her a message, or something? About coming out, I mean.'

'A message for a pupil? Who is it, please?'

Sylvia made a very quick face at her mother, to convey her opinion of the slight tiresomeness of the voice at the school, and proceeded almost simultaneously.

'It's for a girl called (Oh, dear, what is her proper name?) —— It's for Miss Brett.'

If only the voice would explain whether it were a mistress or a maid, it would make it so much simpler. But it was the most non-committal voice that Sylvia had ever heard. Except that it sounded a little suspicious all the time.

'The line is not very clear,' it now answered. 'Would you mind spelling that?'

'Brett,' said Sylvia. 'B–R–E–double T. She is at your school, isn't she? Perhaps you could —— Hullo! I say — hullo!'

No answer. But the line was still full of energy and rushings and roarings. Only there had been a bump as though the voice had put its receiver down on a table.

'Hullo! I say!'

'Cut off, darling?' suggested Mrs. Shirley.

'No, Mummie; at least, I don't think so. But they seem to have —— Oh, hullo!'

Someone was clearing her throat.

'Is that still St. Eth——'

'This is Miss Mulberry speaking. Is that Pippingfold?'

Sylvia was astonished.

'Pippingfold?' she echoed. 'No. At least, yes — in a way. But I didn't ask for Miss Mulberry. Can't you find Miss Brett?'

Another very quick face at Mummie, signifying that the other end of the line was off its head.

'What?' it said.

'Can't — you — find — Miss — Brett?'

Faint whisperings.

'Hullo!' shouted Sylvia again.

The voice that had called itself Miss Mulberry had gone, and the first voice — which was that of Miss Thrush, the secretary — had returned. But if it had been guarded before, it was now positively glacial.

'Miss Brett has not returned,' it said. 'Miss Mulberry says will you please write.'

'Will I please what?'

'Write.' And a prodigious rolling of the second letter.

'What about?' demanded Sylvia. 'I only wanted to —— Hullo! I say — hi! Oh, what a hateful person. Mummie, did you hear that?'

'Darling, how could I?'

'Such a scaly sort of voice. And she said she'd gone away.'

'Who, darling? The young man's sister?'

Sylvia made a quick face which said: 'Oh, please, Mummie — don't let's tease each other.' But she answered quite normally.

'Yes, darling. It's rather sickening, isn't it? And rather funny, because why should she go away in the middle of the term?'

'Illness?'

'They never sent *me* away when I was ill. Oh, I see — you mean someone else. Well, if it's that old man at the Manor House, I must say . . .'

'What, darling?'

But the necessity seemed to have passed away. Perhaps Sylvia didn't really want Mr. Cottenham to be seriously ill — or at any rate not enough to say so aloud. Or perhaps —— But no; if Beaky were ill, surely they wouldn't fetch his younger sister away from school to share the risk of infection. And Beaky mustn't be ill, because that would spoil all the fun down here, and couldn't be allowed. For if Beaky were really ill, one would have to decide something terribly important which one was determined not to decide. And so, with immense strength of character, Sylvia drove the idea out of her mind. It was, after all, extremely unlikely that anyone as healthy-looking as that should be ill during such remarkably healthy weather.

'Oh, well,' she said, aloud; 'whatever it is, it means

we can't have her for lunch; so it's no good bothering. What are *you* going to do, darling?'

Mrs. Shirley was going to get up, it appeared. And take a little turn, if there were time. And have some lunch. And if Sylvia could find Carter or get a message sent to him, she'd like the car about half-past two.

'For Pippingfold, you mean?'

Yes, because one must settle about the rock-garden before the plants started arriving. And it was essential to see how Purvis had managed with the Darwins. And if the second new boiler hadn't arrived, or if they had dropped it again and cracked it, then how important to spoil Mr. Everett's Whitsun holiday for him, as well as one's own.

'Yes, of course, darling,' said Sylvia. 'And when do you think we'll be back?'

Was this a reference to the concert-party?

'Well, yes. Because you did promise, darling.'

The pledge should certainly be redeemed. But they'd be back long before the concert-party could possibly begin. About six o'clock, probably.

'Then may I ask the porter to get us some tickets?'

'If you think it's safer.'

'Well, it's frightfully full of people outside, and it *is* Saturday night.'

'All right, darling. Of course. And you'll remember about Carter?'

'Oh, yes, Mummie. I'll do it now.'

Again the Shirleys exchange the glances which always accompany their conversation — playing round it like a series of footnotes which often mean far more than the actual text; often, also, mean something totally different from the words which they illustrate. Then Sylvia slips out of the door, and — as no one is

looking — takes a run and a slide on the tempting surface of the long corridor. But she is grown-up again as soon as she has done this, and goes downstairs as a very businesslike aide-de-camp.

Plans for the family's first day at the Majestic seem to be settled, and very harmless plans they are. Perhaps they are a little remote from the numerous national and international problems with which the morning papers on Mrs. Shirley's bed are filled; but it *is* Whitsun, and it *is* Saturday. Very well, then; let's leave the family to carry them out, consoling ourselves with the employment that they are finding for so many wage-earners (including the Diamond Dominoes), and let's pick up the story elsewhere.

2

But for the fact that Snubs Tipton's outer calm, though never his inner philosophy, had been just slightly jangled by his interview with Mr. Cottenham, we doubt if he would have spoken so rashly in Gertie's hearing. 'We'll be there in another hour,' he had said, and at these words one could almost see Gertie pricking up her ears, and whisking her tail, and stamping obstinately with her foot.

'Oh, will we?' one could imagine her retorting. 'And how do you think we're going to do it? Is that the way to speak to someone who has brought you down from London without a pause or an accident? Just you wait till I get you a little further from the main roads and garages, and I'll teach you to presume on a lady's good-nature. An hour, I think you said? Oh, very good. Oh, very rich indeed!'

And having bided her time until they had left the telegraph-poles and were cutting across the lonely

desert of Wissingfield Common, she gave a slow, sour smile, and selected an ancient trick from her capacious repertory. A jarring motion was suddenly communicated to the rescue-party, and their eyes met with a look of wry resignation.

'Tyre?' said Beaky.

'Tyre it is,' said Snubs. 'Or was, rather. You'd better take off your coat.'

They both took off their coats. They got the jack out of the dickey, and the jack-handle from under the front seat, and the brace out of one of the side-pockets. After they had nearly burst themselves in successive efforts to shift any one of the four rusty nuts surrounding the hub, Snubs suddenly remembered that those on the near-side, where the trouble had arisen, were furnished with left-hand threads. But the first attempts had been so powerful that it was some time before they could profit by this knowledge.

At about 1.25 P.M., however, the wheel broke loose from its last moorings of mud and rust, and fell heavily on Beaky's foot. He received no injury for which any claim could be made against the underwriters, but did undoubtedly experience one of those brief spasms of agony which make it advisable to take a brisk run. He ran, therefore; about twenty-five yards along the road and twenty-five yards back, cursing all forms of mechanical traction with much volubility as he did so. This treatment was of great benefit to his foot, but couldn't be said to have made him any cooler. Indeed, it had raised his temperature to such a point that he concluded the round trip by lying down and gasping by the roadside.

'Get up,' said Snubs coldly.

'Why?'

'This is why.'

He bounced the spare-wheel on the ground, and it was at once obvious that Gertie hadn't yet finished with them.

'Gosh, Snubs; it's flat.'

'As a pancake. If I'd got that boy here . . .'

But the boy who had so cheerfully agreed to mend last week's puncture, and had so light-heartedly dismissed it from his mind, was nearly fifty miles away in London. However delightful it would be to address him on the subject of his shortcomings, the treat must be postponed at any rate until Gertie could leave Wissingfield Common.

'Better take your waistcoat off,' said Snubs, as he started removing his own. 'I'll need help over this.'

Nobody wants to be reminded of what happened during the next forty-five minutes. It is sufficient to say that both members of the expedition weighed considerably less at the end than at the beginning, notwithstanding the extraordinary amount of dust, grit, French chalk and rubber-solution with which they were now coated; and that both of them had taken several of those involuntary runs up and down the road which can be stimulated even in the hottest weather by the general untrustworthiness of a tyre-lever. Snubs had caught it on the knuckles and shins, and Beaky on the thumb and knee-cap. But at twenty minutes past two the tube was back inside the cover, and not so very much later the process of inflation had been completed, and the wheel had been screwed into position.

The jack, the brace, the levers and the repair-outfit were tossed hurriedly into the dickey; the expedition wiped its hands on the grass, and resumed its discarded garments.

'Everything on board?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Well, you're wrong. We've forgotten the old wheel.'

Out with the brace. Where's that nut? In the dickey? On the running-board? In somebody's pocket? Under the car?

'I say, Snubs —— have you seen all this oil? Where do you think it's coming from?'

'What?'

'All this oil.'

'All what oil?'

But it's no good pretending not to see it. Gertie may have been over-lubricated when she set out, but no car can yield a puddle like that and proceed without risk of seizure.

'It's the old trouble,' says Snubs, battling with an attack of vertigo which has resulted from his attempt to diagnose the origin of the puddle without kneeling in it. 'That plug never did fit, and the washer's gone again. I'll have to cut a new one out of —— Hullo! What's happened to the brakes?'

What, indeed? Gertie has certainly got to be moved unless she is now actually to lie in the puddle, but though the brake-lever is definitely off, she doesn't seem to be aware of it. The case is becoming more complicated every moment. There is a most sinister lack of resonance from the off-side rear drum.

'But she was pulling all right,' Snubs expostulates to the blazing heavens. 'I know the speedometer's bust, but I bet we touched forty on that last stretch. She'd hardly have chewed the lining up all in a minute.'

Up come the floor-boards. Out comes the jack. It is

insinuated precariously under the differential-housing, and up go Gertie's hind-quarters. Then the jack slips, and they come down again. Yet, as Galileo said, she moves. The shock, though they won't discover this until later, has started a leak through the recently applied patch, but it has also overcome the rusty resistance of that invisible cam-spindle. There may or may not be any lining left, but at least Snubs can now get under the engine and insert his new washer.

At a quarter past three — and you must remember that the expedition has not so far had any lunch — Gertie moves gingerly away under her own power, leaving a selection of visiting-cards this time in the shape of two iridescent pools, one deliberately discarded handkerchief and one accidentally discarded adjustable wrench. It is no good moving more rapidly, though, for it is unquestionable that a pint of the wrong sort of oil is very inadequate fodder for her bearings. Still, if only they can reach a village . . .

Fate seems to smile again. They do reach a village. They come coasting down into Great Wissingfield, and though the Coach and Horses is closed, in obedience to the law, it isn't unoccupied. Snubs exerts his charm on a toothless young woman whom he discovers at the back entrance, and she will both feed the expedition — after a fashion — and let it wash. Also she will send an idiot brother to find the proprietor of a combined smithy and garage which lurks, appropriately enough, under a spreading chestnut tree on the other side of the village pond. Only it's Saturday, she explains inarticulately, and he may have gone to see the cricket-match.

In view of this possibility Snubs decides to accompany the idiot brother, and is thus privileged —

though he doesn't know it — to see Carter and the Shirleys swooping through Great Wissingfield on their way to Green Hatches. Does Beaky's heart warn him of this extraordinary coincidence, or advise him to leave the scullery sink and dash out, like a dripping scarecrow, to stop the big car and ask Sylvia to put him out of his misery? Perhaps it is as well that it doesn't, for the conditions would be distinctly unfavourable for a love-scene. The rumpled, ruffled and temporarily collarless swain. The adored one surrounded by her mother and the great Carter. The paralyzing publicity of a street full of eye-witnesses, all of whom are wondering what on earth to do with their Saturday afternoon. No; Beaky has never really stopped thinking of Sylvia and his letter — whatever else may have fluttered the surface of his mind, or have removed the surface of his skin; but even the most devoted and sensitive lover is not necessarily telepathic. The Shirleys swoop away and leave no trace of their passage. Even their dust has settled by the time that Snubs comes back with the village engineer and blacksmith.

The washer is holding out well, and it seems better to add to the wrong sort of oil than to risk changing it.

'But what about that there toyre, sir?'

'Tyre? Oh, Lord — it's flat again. Beaky!'

'Hullo!'

'No, don't put your coat on. I'll want you.'

For the time being, though, Gertie seems to have had all the fun that she wants. Or perhaps she recognizes the futility of wasting her energies just outside a garage, and with a professional to lead the opposing team. With six hands and a larger set of levers the patch is exposed, removed, and replaced in little more

than twenty-five minutes. A powerful foot-pump completes the business of reinflation before she has time to remember the trick of the grit in the valve-seating. Congratulations are exchanged; money passes; the toothless young woman again offers the use of the scullery sink, and does not lose by her sympathy. The idiot brother is the richer by a shilling, which he apparently swallows.

At a quarter past four the expedition rolls away on the tarmac towards Friar's Holt and Newcliff. Only a little after five — and it would have been quicker still if it hadn't taken the wrong turning when leaving the town — it draws up outside the main gates of St. Ethelburga's.

'There!' says Snubs, calmly but triumphantly.

Gertie can hardly have helped hearing him, but she merely stands and looks as if gear-oil wouldn't melt in her mouth.

3

'What more can I do?' Miss Mulberry had asked on Friday afternoon, and by Saturday morning the question could safely be put with an even further degree of unanswerable righteousness. What more could anyone do?

Not a word from Mr. Cottenham by the first or second posts; not a sound or a sign from Ursula his ward. Was it unreasonable to suppose, then, that the former had solved the mystery of the latter's whereabouts, and was St. Ethelburga to humble herself by sending any more reply-paid telegrams which simply vanished into the void? Naturally one was still curious just as one was still outraged by the flagrant manner of Ursula's departure; but one no longer leapt with

alarm each time that the telephone-bell rang in Miss Thrush's little room next door, in case it should be a message from the police or a hospital. More and more one remembered one's own dignity, and the dignity of the successful institution with which one had been so long associated. More and more one looked on the brighter aspect of an escapade which had removed such a notable thorn from the side of St. Ethelburga's otherwise healthy and comfortable body. The truth was that Mr. Cottenham was ashamed of his ward's behaviour and of his own behaviour in sending her back to cause all this annoyance, but lacked the grace and decency to say so. Presently, though, he or she would have to write and ask for her luggage to be sent after her, and then — well, then Miss Mulberry would have quite a number of cold and calculated phrases to incorporate in a typewritten letter. But none of them would refer to the fear and remorse from which she had already almost entirely recovered. If she had been scared stiff for more than twenty-four hours, neither of them should ever have the pleasure of knowing it. On the contrary, and unless she had lost her cunning in dictating typewritten letters, they would experience a good deal more than twenty-four hours' annoyance themselves.

'Monstrous!' said Miss Mulberry, as she blotted the endorsement on a cheque with great energy and self-reliance. 'Some of these parents and guardians need a pretty stiff lesson in common courtesy and ordinary responsibility — upsetting the whole school like this and undermining my authority. I shall be perfectly civil myself, but I shall most certainly point out —— Yes, Miss Thrush? Do you want me?'

Miss Thrush — all *pince-nez* and striped blouse and

bulging forehead under tiresomely fluffy hair — stood in the communicating doorway and looked perplexed.

'If it's not disturbing you, Miss Mulberry?'

'Well?'

'Someone is asking for Ursula Brett on the telephone. I thought perhaps ——'

'Wait. I'll speak myself.'

Miss Thrush looked enormously relieved, and faded away. Miss Mulberry stalked through to the early model of a wall-instrument and seized the swinging cord. We know what happened then. From the head mistress's point of view a female voice had admitted that it was speaking from Pippingfold, and had then had the colossal impudence to ask her if she couldn't find Miss Brett. She had dropped the receiver as though it had bitten her on the ear, and had vented some of her feelings on the worm-like secretary — only wishing at the moment that she were less worm-like so that she could have the pleasure of shrieking at her.

'Tell them,' she said, trembling with suppressed emotion, 'that Miss Brett is not here. Tell them I refuse to discuss anything further on the telephone until Mr. Cottenham answers my letters and telegrams.'

Then she had marched back into her study, and had slammed the door.

We know also — or if we have forgotten, then we can easily turn back and see — how the worm-like one paraphrased this challenge, and how Sylvia was left gasping in her mother's bedroom at the Majestic Hotel. What we have still to be told is how Miss Mulberry's blood-pressure suddenly turned on her and flung her back into a fresh bout of anxiety. And how she battled with this — employing both rage and

reason — and how she eventually won through to something approaching her recent detachment, but with crumbling edges and cracks on the surface which might at any moment precipitate her into the cauldron beneath.

'Monstrous!' she said again. 'Not even troubling to speak himself. Sending someone round to speak on someone else's telephone. To annoy me, I suppose. To try and make me commit myself. "Can't you find Miss Brett?" Good Heavens!'

With a little more of this she would convince herself that Mr. Cottenham and his ward were conspiring to make fun of her, which would relieve the pressure in one direction even though it added to it in another. Meanwhile, Miss Thrush went home on her bicycle to her lodgings in the town, and Miss Mulberry — not so unstrung but that she still realized the value of invisibility — lunched alone off a tray in the antiseptic study.

Yes, she felt calmer again. She felt calmer still as she caught a glimpse through the big bow-window of the gigantic Nature-Ramble setting forth over the downs. There was a hint of reluctant resignation in the backs of the attendant shepherdesses which reminded her, consolingly, that she was still — as you might say — boss of this outfit. 'Go,' she had said; and off they had all straggled and trickled in the blazing sunshine, doomed by a word to a long afternoon's tramp without hope of appeal. Miss Mulberry had, and has, many excellent points, but it would be idle to deny that a faint smile illuminated her features as the Ramble plodded wearily towards the skyline. She had passed through nearly two days of great strain and stress, and she had been stung to a frenzy by that telephone-

message just as she was on the verge of recovery; but she was still monarch of all she surveyed, and no one but the utterly insignificant Miss Thrush was aware that she had ever lost her temper.

She opened another window and sat down at her desk. She wrote and read. She nodded at this, and frowned magisterially at that, and pursed up her lips at the other. She made marks with blue pencils and red pencils and a gold-mounted fountain-pen. She did things with paper-clips and paper-fasteners. She ruled lines with accuracy and skill. Paste and drawing-pins obeyed her, nor were elastic-bands and pink tape backward in yielding to her will. System, in fact, once more brooded soothingly over the antiseptic study, and where System hovered no thought of Ursula Brett could possibly survive. With the entire school away on its pilgrimage, Miss Mulberry could, and did, luxuriate in that pure educational atmosphere where pupils take their proper places as symbols and ciphers and abbreviations on card-indexes, and where the pattern of a complicated scholastic tapestry can advance without endless obstruction on the part of the individual stitches. Miss Mulberry, in short, was so happy in this imaginary world that she observed neither the passage of time nor the occasional fits of dreamy unconsciousness which so notably assisted its progress. Sometimes she would sit for as long as ten or fifteen minutes, with the butt-end of her gold-mounted fountain-pen gently tapping against her excellent front teeth, while she wandered through that distant algebraical country and admired its astonishing orderliness. Each time that she emerged, she felt a greater sense of ease and refreshment, and each time she plunged with deeper concentration and assiduity into the welter of stationery on her big desk.

It is understandable, therefore — or should be, if we have made ourselves clear — why she never heard the crunch of tyres outside the bow-window or the dying throbs of an internal-combustion engine. Nor did she notice the figure which came and stared at her over the stumpy euonymus-hedge, before turning aside to enter the wide-open front door. But when the same figure, having threaded the entrance-hall and left-hand corridor without let or hindrance, rapped suddenly on the inner defences of the pale-green study, Miss Mulberry came to herself with a start and emitted a swift inquiry.

'Yes?' she cried. 'Who is it?'

The latch creaked, and the door opened.

'May I come in?' said a complete stranger.

Miss Mulberry blinked, and half-rose from her chair. The complete stranger was a young-looking elderly woman, neatly and becomingly dressed, and with an expression of twinkling calm — if that conveys anything to you — such as can only be achieved by a long life of independence and courage. No parent — or at any rate no parent with a daughter at St. Ethelburga's — had ever looked like this. Nor was it an expression to be met with among Miss Mulberry's elderly female acquaintances in Newcliff. The head mistress's memory was now in perfect order, and she was positive that she had never seen this visitor before. But she also knew that the visitor had come here with a definite purpose, and that this purpose would not, for once, reveal itself either as an appeal for charitable contributions or as an offer to lecture on Girl Guides or Wild Flowers. Nor, she was convinced, could anyone who looked like that wish to recommend some new and foreign system of mind-training combined with calis-

thenics. Her vast experience would have recognized any of these types, but this time it told her nothing.

'I'm afraid . . .' she said, rising a little higher and elevating her eyebrows. 'That's to say, I don't think I have the pleasure . . .'

Here any ordinary visitor would have apologized for entering unannounced, and would instantly have explained what she had come for. But the stranger had merely closed the door behind her, and started removing her gloves. She was also examining the various chairs, with a view, apparently, to selecting one for her own use.

'Can I . . .?' said Miss Mulberry, still suspended behind the big desk, and raising her eyebrows yet higher.

'Thanks,' said the stranger, dropping comfortably on to the sofa. 'Do sit down, won't you? You're the head mistress, of course. Or am I wrong?'

Miss Mulberry suddenly felt that she had seen someone like this before, and that they, also, had tried to take charge of some far-off interview — if, indeed, they hadn't actually succeeded. But she hadn't the faintest idea who they had been.

'If you would kindly . . .' she began again.

'What?' said the stranger, looking up from an exploration of her hand-bag. 'I've forgotten your name, I'm afraid, but —— No, don't tell me; I nearly had it then. I've got it. "Raspberry." Miss Raspberry. Or am I quite wrong?'

Miss Mulberry gasped; once at this ridiculous and offensive mistake, and again because the stranger had just pulled out a cigarette, and had lit it, and had flung the match into her waste-paper basket. Never had she been so treated in her own fortress. Never ——

'My name,' she heard herself saying coldly, 'is Miss Mulberry. And to what do I owe ——'

'Of course!' exclaimed the stranger, leaning back and exhaling a cloud of smoke. 'How stupid of me. I've no manners, though; have I?'

She had the audacity to smile.

'Perhaps,' said Miss Mulberry, 'you will be good enough ——'

'Of course, of course,' said the stranger, waving her cigarette about. 'But I've done such a lot since I got in, and you know what it is, don't you? I only landed yesterday, and I've been on the rush the whole time. You look puzzled, don't you? Well, never mind. My name's Millet. Mrs. Millet.'

Miss Mulberry still looked puzzled, but it seemed just possible that the stranger had been expressing some sort of regret for her behaviour. She sat down, and removed a considerable strain from most of her muscles.

'Mrs. Millet?' she repeated, with an eye wandering towards the shelf of card-indexes.

'Yes. You don't remember me? Never mind. I came here once — oh, years ago — but to tell the honest truth I've changed a good deal. Much thinner, you know, and far better for it. But you haven't changed at all, Miss Mulberry. I'd have known you almost anywhere. It suits you, I suppose? Well, well; that's splendid.'

Miss Mulberry opened her mouth and shut it again.

'Now, may we send for my niece?' the visitor continued. 'I want to take her away with me.'

'Niece?' said Miss Mulberry, faintly. 'Who —— But it's the middle of the term. I don't quite ——'

'Oh, never mind about that. I've come here specially — and on the most shocking boat, too. I'd only just realized what was happening, and I'm going to

stay here now. I'm sure what she needs is less work and more fun. Dances, you know, and all that sort of thing. I'll see to it.'

'Yes, but ——'

'I was out there,' proceeded Mrs. Millet, waving her cigarette vaguely in the direction of the horizon, 'staying with the most delightful people. Sir Gervase and Lady Tipton. What? You don't know them? Well, never mind. And then this letter arrived — from their boy, you see — and I realized that Charles — I still think of him as Charles, though I haven't seen him since we had a row during the war, and naturally I've always mistrusted him, though I did think —— What was I saying? Oh, Charles, of course. Well, I realized that he was still keeping the money himself. Not that he'd spend it, of course. He hasn't got the guts. What's that?'

Miss Mulberry had no chance to explain why she had blenched and overturned the paste-bottle, for the visitor rushed on again at once.

'So I cabled to my lawyer, and he looked up the will and cabled to me, and I caught the next boat. It was time I came home, anyhow, and they always say blood's thicker than water — if you follow me. Mind you, I blame myself, and I'd no more take an old friend into the Courts — even if he did insult me — than fly to the moon. But that's not saying he hasn't got to fork out and answer a few questions. We've started on that already, in fact, and what I've spent on the ship's wireless would surprise you. But I've always liked those children, and I'm going to get this thing straightened out for them. I tried to see the boy this morning, but he'd gone off somewhere. Still, he can wait. He's got a job and he's working at it. What I want, Miss Mulberry, is the girl. Will you tell her?'

As she concluded with this brisk and quite unintelligible question, the visitor shied the end of her cigarette into the empty fireplace — the first time, probably, that it had ever received such an object. The head mistress reacted with an involuntary shudder, and made a movement as though she would pick it out.

'Well?' added Mrs. Millet.

Miss Mulberry's eyes swung back from her desecrated hearth.

'Am I to understand ——' she began.

'Good Lord, yes,' said Mrs. Millet. 'Now. The sooner, the better. I want to take her off with me at once.'

'But — excuse me — I've heard nothing from any of my pupils' parents — I mean ——'

'Parents? But I'm talking about my niece. She hasn't got any parents.'

'Oh!' said Miss Mulberry, trying and failing to think far faster than any human being has yet thought. 'I see. Of course. I remember now. Her aunt. This is very awkward. Dear me, I wish you hadn't come all this way. Or are we speaking of the same girl?'

'I,' said Mrs. Millet, as though humouring a backward boy, 'am speaking of my niece Ursula. Ursula Brett. I am her aunt. I want to see her.'

'Quite,' said Miss Mulberry. 'Exactly. Then you've not heard?'

'I've not heard what?'

'I — I'm afraid she isn't here.'

'She's left the school?'

'Well, not precisely. But ——'

'Expelled?'

'No, no. Dear, dear; I wish you could have written. I mean ——'

'But where is she, then? My dear woman, where *is* she?'

If Miss Mulberry blenched this time, the reflex was purely automatic.

'I don't know,' she said feebly. 'She's disappeared.'

'Where? When? What have you been doing to her?'

'Nothing. She ran away. The day before yesterday.'

'Alone?'

'Yes. That's to say, she was seen riding away on — what do they call it? On a bracket. With a man in a blazer.'

'Good God!' said Mrs. Millet. 'And you did nothing? You tried to hush it up? You didn't attempt to run after her?'

A third party could scarcely have helped laughing at the picture of Miss Mulberry running after a motor-bicycle, but no third party was present and the room was notably free from signs of amusement.

'I don't know,' said the head mistress, 'what right you have to cross-examine me like this, but I have made every effort to trace her. I also communicated with her guardian at once, but from the tone of his earlier replies I gathered that he either knew or guessed where she was, and didn't choose to tell me. I may remind you, also, that I'm a very busy woman, and ——'

'Bosh!' interrupted the impossible visitor. 'Do you suppose that Charles Cottenham would ever wear a blazer or ride on a motor-bicycle?'

'I didn't suppose anything of the sort. Nevertheless, it is my opinion that your niece is at Pippingfold.'

Was it? Perhaps it was, now that she had actually said so aloud. Yes, of course it was; for where else

could she be, without any clothes and without any money, and when Mr. Cottenham had been so rude and ungrateful? Besides, there is nothing like saying something aloud — especially in an argumentative tone for which there has been great provocation — to transform a number of vague doubts into one crystallized assurance.

'That's where she is,' added Miss Mulberry, rising to her feet. 'And if you had only explained why you were here and what you wanted a little sooner, I should have told you so before. I've been put to a great deal of inconvenience over this affair already — a very great deal of inconvenience and trouble — and I may say — I may tell you ——'

Here a growing uncertainty as to how this sentence was going to end was made more doubtful still by the very obvious fact that the visitor wasn't listening. She, also, had risen to her feet, and had crossed the study, and was straightening her hat with the aid of a large framed photograph of the King of the Belgians — a relic of St. Ethelburga's patriotism during the Great War.

'I see,' she said, turning round. 'You think he sent for her, then?'

The head mistress shrugged her shoulders.

'It's possible,' added Mrs. Millet. 'But I wonder why. Had he written to her lately, do you know? Or sent her anything to sign?'

'I've no idea.'

'Mischief,' said Mrs. Millet darkly. 'I ought to have waited till I got back. I must think this over. I must ring up that gas-bag of a lawyer. I must meet him there — as soon as possible. Very well, Miss Mulberry; I dare say you did your best. But you liked the girl? Eh?'

'She was very popular. I don't know that I should describe her as one of my best pupils, but ——'

'I should jolly well hope not,' said Mrs. Millet, with a laugh of surprising vehemence. 'But of course she was popular. I was popular myself, though you mightn't think it; and when I was at school, do you know what I did? I tried to set fire to it. Not bad, eh? Well, good-bye. Thanks awfully for all your help. No, don't bother; I remember the way out. And, I say, if there are any bills or anything, you'd better keep them till I write to you. I don't think you'll hear much more from Charles Cottenham. No, I don't think so, somehow. Good-bye.'

What an appalling family! And of course she'd left the door open. They always did.

But Miss Mulberry hadn't the strength or determination to close it. She just sat back among the ruins of her System, and stared blankly at the King of the Belgians, and repeated fragments of the recent dialogue without hearing her own voice. Pippingfold? Yes, but what if she weren't at Pippingfold, after all? What if that dreadful woman came back again, and tried to drag her into the mysterious scandal at which she had kept hinting? That talk of lawyers made Miss Mulberry's blood run cold, for never so far had the blackest crimes at St. Ethelburga's gone further than these pale-green walls. Popular, indeed! She'd like to have that woman back again for just five minutes, and tell her a little more about her precious niece.

No, she wouldn't, though. She never wanted to hear of her, or from her again. Or from any of them. Far, far better to tear up the account for Ursula's stationery and extras during this unspeakable summer term, than to have any more dealings with any of this

pack of maniacs. If they wrote to her, she wouldn't answer. If they telephoned, she would refuse to speak. If they came here, she would issue instructions that ——

The door gave a sudden creak, and the head mistress awoke from her passionate reverie.

'Who's there?' she snapped. 'What is it?'

The door opened a little wider, and round the edge of it there crept — with the air of a nervous boa-constrictor — a long, thin, weary-looking young man. His light suit was stained here and there with what might be, and indeed was, lubricating-oil. His hair was in distinct disorder. His Adam's-apple was only imperfectly under control, and a twittering, deprecating smile played about his youthful lips like summer lightning in the tropics. His eyes displayed acute fear mingled with desperate resolution. The surface of his countenance was distinctly glossy. And though one of his preposterous legs seemed extremely anxious to bear him further into the room, the other seemed as determined to hook itself round the door and hold him back. He contrived to maintain his unstable equilibrium in these difficult conditions by clutching the inner handle with a grip of steel.

It was open to considerable doubt whether certain sounds proceeding from him were occasioned by hiccups or an attempt at human speech. But in the latter event he would appear to be employing some very primitive and elementary form of dialect, for Miss Mulberry could distinguish nothing but the monosyllable 'Er.'

'Er ——' said the intruder, in fact. 'Er ——' And again: 'Er — er ——'

'What are you doing?' demanded the head mistress. 'Who are you, please? What do you want?'

The intruder looked over his shoulder as though meditating precipitate flight, and looked back again with a sort of apologetic heroism.

'Er ——' he said.

'Would you mind answering me — whoever you are?'

'I say ——'

'Yes?'

'Er — I say — are you Miss Mul-mulberry?'

'I am. And can you please explain why you're here?'

The intruder smiled, shook his head, nodded and frowned.

'Er ——'

'Really ——' began the head mistress impatiently.

'Look here,' interrupted the intruder, incautiously releasing his grip on the doorknob, pitching forward and regaining his balance by an apparent miracle. 'Look here — I say — I want to ask something.'

'Well?'

'If you see what I mean?'

'Not yet,' said the head mistress, still more impatiently. 'Who sent you?'

'Oh, nobody,' said the intruder, very quickly. 'I — I just came. I was a bit worried, you see. A bit windy.'

'A bit what?'

'A bit rattled, you know. A bit dithered.'

Miss Mulberry took a very loud, deep breath.

'My dear young man,' she said, 'have you any idea what you're talking about?'

'What?'

'Do you know where you are? Do you realize that this is St. Ethelburga's School for Girls?'

'Oh, Lord, yes. That's why I'm here. That's just the point. I say — have you heard anything?'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Any news, I mean? Have you caught them?'

Miss Mulberry struck the big desk with her ruler, and the young man started as though she had struck him as well.

'Please pull yourself together,' she barked. 'Talk sense if you can; and if you can't, please leave my study. I've had quite enough interruption this afternoon, and I've a lot of work to get through. Now, then; is this your idea of a joke?'

'No, no. Oh, Lord, no, Miss Mul-mulberry. I'm deadly serious. I've come on purpose. I ——'

'Why? What for?'

'To see you, of course, Miss Mulberry-berry. To find out if — I mean, where — I mean, whether —— Well, you know what I mean.'

Miss Mulberry gasped like a hot-water cistern.

'I don't,' she snapped. 'I don't know who you are, or why you're here, or what a word of all this gibberish means. Your behaviour in forcing your way into this room strikes me as impertinent and intolerable. I strongly suspect that you have been drinking.'

'Well, I haven't,' said Beaky indignantly. 'I haven't even had any proper lunch. I've come all the way from ——'

'Ah, I thought so. You've come here to beg. Well, let me tell you ——'

'I haven't! And I didn't force my way in, either. I came in because all the doors were open and, nobody answered your rotten bell.'

'Rubbish!'

'Well, where's my sister, anyway? What have you done with her?'

'Your sister? What have I got to do with your sister? Whom do you think you're speaking about?'

'Noodles, of course. You know, Miss Mumbleberry. The one who ——'

'I don't know!' shouted Miss Mulberry. 'I don't know anything about her, and I refuse to listen to you for another second. Do you hear me? Either you're mad, or you're trying to pull my leg. Noodles, indeed! I've had enough of this. Please go!'

'Yes, but ——'

'Go!'

Miss Mulberry rose to her full height of five feet six inches, and shot out a fierce arm and a fiercely extended forefinger. Not a man in England could have stood his ground when faced with an apparition like that, and Beaky stepped hastily backwards — bringing his person into violent collision with the edge of the door.

'Ow!' he yelped.

'Go!' thundered Miss Mulberry, finding a wild relief to all her accumulated irritation. 'Go at once, or I'll send for the gardeners and have you thrown out. Do you hear me? Go!'

'Yes, I know, but ——'

Once more, and this time accompanied by a majestic movement which can hardly have been equalled since the original expulsion from Eden:

'Go!'

So Beaky went. He didn't mean to run, but the action was forced on him by that invisible step in the darkest part of the corridor, and having once started he was incapable of stopping. He dashed through the empty entrance-hall, he bounded over the mammoth doormat, he leapt from the wide stone steps, the gravel shot from beneath his feet as he raced down the little drive.

'Go!' added Miss Mulberry, reappearing at the bow-

window in exactly the same attitude as before. But Beaky never heard her. The family curse, he was thinking, was working overtime to-day, and never had a dreaded interview proved more disastrous in its actual fulfilment. But Miss Mulberry had said that she knew nothing, and the wild-goose chase must start again. For however he might choose to report the result of his inquiries to his relentless companion outside, it was quite obvious that there were no more clues to be picked up here.

'My hat, what a terror!' he panted. 'I don't care what anyone says, but I'm all on Noodles's side after this. My gosh, what a gorgon! My aunt, what a frightful school!'

Curiously enough, his aunt — whom he had thus piously invoked — was at this moment indulging in very similar conclusions no further away than in the lounge of the Majestic Hotel, where she was having tea before deciding whether or not to drive back to London. But if her nephew's prejudices had arisen very largely as the result of his own behaviour, then we think that St. Ethelburga's can equally hope to survive those of Mrs. Millet. A woman who nearly forty years ago had, on her own confession, attempted educational arson might still preserve certain maggots about the value of such institutions.

Let St. Ethelburga's be comforted, therefore, and let Miss Mulberry hold up her head. We shall not — we are glad to say — see either of them again, but we wish them nothing but peace and prosperity in their expensive and invaluable work. And now that Noodles and the last of her relations have finally left them, we see no reason why they shouldn't continue to enjoy both.

CHAPTER TEN

Further misfortunes of Noodles — Reappearance of an awful character, who is as awful as ever — Progress of the rescue-party — An aërial survey, and a big, black cloud — Dramatic scene outside the Pavilion Chalet

I

NOODLES lunched off pork-pie, pickles and canned peaches of a strangely lurid tint, washed down — as the saying goes, with the chalky water from the Newcliff main. Miss Selbrook and Miss La Touche added to this simple repast a couple of black bottles with some dark, frothy stuff in them which the flies liked very much, and a number of cigarettes which the flies (and Noodles) didn't like at all. As usual, they had spent far more of their salaries on shopping than they had wished or intended, and had received in exchange far less than they had hoped or desired. From these premises they deduced, repeatedly and wearisomely, that the Newcliff shopkeepers were thieves, though at the same time they kept hinting — and sometimes more than hinting — that it would be to Miss Brett's advantage if she took over some of their stock at valuation.

Noodles found it all rather difficult. At first, apparently, she was supposed to agree that the articles were ruinous in cost and rotten in material, and then she was expected to be grateful for the opportunity of repurchasing them. When she tried to escape from the subject by explaining that she hadn't got any money, she was met with obscure reproaches. If she hadn't got any money, then why was she so particular? And if

she never spent anything, then why hadn't she got any money? And if she didn't need the money for spending, then why had she come along and done poor old Maisie out of her job? Did she realize that poor old Maisie had rejected a perfectly marvellous offer from the Crazy Crickets — who always played right through till October — and that she hadn't got any rich friends or relations like some people? They wondered, they said, how Miss Brett could sit there and have the face to complain about everything, when girls who had had nearly twenty years' experience were wondering where their next meal was to come from, and in the absence of other diet were eating their hearts out.

This picture naturally filled the puzzled listener with anxiety and dismay.

'But,' she protested, 'Mr. Vaughan said that the other person had left on purpose. He never told me ——'

'Oh, we know all about Lester,' interrupted Miss La Touche. 'He'd say anything.'

'And what if Maisie did walk out?' demanded Miss Selbrook, more bafflingly than ever. 'She's got her feelings, hasn't she, and if a gentleman can't make allowances for a lady, then what I say is he's no right to be in management. It wasn't her that started the row.'

'And if it was,' added Miss La Touche, 'that doesn't affect what I keep telling you.'

'That's just what I say,' contributed Miss Selbrook.

'And what I told Maisie when I saw her, and she told me what I told you she said,' chimed in Miss La Touche.

Noodles's large, startled eyes kept darting from one

slightly congested countenance to the other, while every now and then she drew in a quick breath as she thought she saw a chance of repeating her innocence and regret. She had only just discovered that Mr. Vaughan hadn't invented the name which he had forced on her, but if this knowledge horrified her because of the sense of unforgivable intrusion which it brought with it, she was still more horrified to learn that the rightful owner was apparently starving somewhere in this very town. She remembered now, which she had so stupidly forgotten before, how Mr. Vaughan had spoken of his banished comédienne as 'Maisie' when she had met him up on the downs. She remembered also, and anybody else would have understood it all at once, how tattered and weatherworn were the numerous bills on which the list of Diamond Dominoes was set out. No wonder these women looked on her as an interloper. No wonder they hated having her here, when their real friend was in this awful situation. Oh, if only they would stop talking to each other, and just look at her for one moment, so that she could tell them how little she had realized what she was doing, and how she would speak to Mr. Vaughan the first second she saw him again about putting it right.

But they didn't stop talking to each other, and they had quite given up looking at her. A genuine domino would have flared up, and have burst into the conversation with dramatic passion which would have given a great deal of enjoyment to all concerned, and, in all probability, would have ended by a general agreement that Miss Dolores had got exactly what she deserved. The bone-laziness of the true domino could appreciate a row so long as someone else took their fair share, and cared little or nothing for loyalty. But if this new girl

merely gaped and stared like that, well, then, let's talk of something that needs less effort and concentration. Let's slide easily away from poor old Maisie — who touched one of us when we met her this morning for five bob which will certainly not be heard of again — and let's drift along on a sea of Guinness and cigarette-smoke to the sort of dialogue which can look after itself.

'. . . so I said to him, "Well," I said, "you may call yourself a dancer," I said, "but, believe me, I've forgotten a great deal more than *you've* ever learnt." And I can tell you, my dear . . .'

Noodles continues to gape and stare.

'. . . at the Electric Palace, and we had to open the same night we got in. Well, I didn't care. "You won't worry *me*," I said, "because the people here *love* me. They *eat* my stuff," I said, "and . . ."'

Noodles feels that if she stays here any longer she will be hypnotized as well as suffocated. They *won't* look at her. They *won't* stop talking to each other. They don't care that they have made her feel like the worst kind of cuckoo in someone else's nest, and that when she offers her resignation this evening — as of course she must and will — she will be left without a place to go to, hideously in debt to Mr. Vaughan and these awful lodgings, and with only sevenpence, which doesn't really belong to her, tied in the corner of her handkerchief.

And what's more, she doesn't want them to care. All she wants is to get away from them. To get outdoors, even if it means walking until she drops. To try, somehow, to find a little temporary world of her own, since she is now neither a ward, nor a schoolgirl, nor just a comédienne. Since she is nothing, and hates it.

Since she has never felt so lonely in her life, and yet has never wished more overpoweringly to be alone.

Since everything, in fact, is Quite Awful.

Poor Noodles. A touch of weakness makes her look back just as she is leaving the stuffy little sitting-room, but nobody asks her where she is going, or, indeed, appears to notice that she is leaving. The smelly little passage outside no longer seems friendly and cosy, as it had been on that first adventurous afternoon. It dislikes her now quite as much as she dislikes it, and very nearly as much as she dislikes herself. She takes the school hat, which for two days has been without the school ribbon, from a peg on the revolting piece of furniture between the broken barometer and the ornamental drain-pipe which serves as an umbrella-stand. She pulls it over her short hair, and steps off the cracked linoleum on to the ragged doormat. No harlequin could be more brightly coloured than she is, as the sunlight streams through the stained-glass panels of the front door, but equally no harlequin could look more mournful.

Then she opens it, and closes it behind her, and walks down the slimy brick path to the rusty iron gate. And opens that too, with a cry of agony from the hinges. And steps down on to the narrow pavement, and for no better reason than that she had turned to the left this morning, now wanders away to the right.

'By Jove!' cries a loud and cheery voice. 'I say — what a bit of luck! I say — how perfectly topping! Miss Brett! Noodles!'

Noodles starts from her dreams, and smiles automatically — and, let us add, ravishingly — at the big man who is bawling at her. But the smile is frozen on her face, and her eyes become larger than ever, as she

recognizes that she has been greeted, and that her hand is being shaken, by no other than the red-faced and diabolical Fitzgibbon.

2

'Oh!' said Noodles, and Fitzgibbon beamed again.

'Splendid!' he said. 'Now, what about it?'

What about what? He didn't look the least ashamed of himself, or the least embarrassed, or the least as if he remembered the unspeakable occasion on which they had last met and parted. But his friendliness was almost more terrifying than if he had fallen on his knees and begged to be forgiven.

'You're stopping here?' he asked.

'Well, yes,' said Noodles.

'By Jove! With old What's-His-Name?'

'Well, no. Not exactly. I'm — I'm more or less by myself.'

She wished she hadn't said that, when she saw how the look of friendliness suddenly increased. But she certainly wasn't going to explain everything to Fitzgibbon. And (Oh, Noodles!) it was something to be talking to somebody again, and as long as he didn't say anything more about Pippingfold, he couldn't really do much harm out here in the street. Though he was still rather awful.

'By yourself?' he repeated. 'For long, eh?'

'Well, no. I don't think so.'

Fitzgibbon laughed, and Noodles remembered how large his teeth were.

'By Jove!' he said. 'You're very mysterious, aren't you? But you've not forgotten me. That's something. I'm here till Monday, you know — for the racing.'

'Oh, yes?'

'Oh, yes,' said Fitzgibbon, and laughed again. 'So what about it?'

'About the racing, you mean? I hadn't heard. I — I hope you'll have good luck.'

'By Jove, I hope so, too. I think I shall, somehow. I mopped up a packet at Kempton last week. I tell you, I'm a man to know.'

Noodles wasn't so sure of this, but it was impossible not to congratulate him.

'Oh, I'm awfully glad,' she said. 'And have you heard from your lawyer?'

'No kidding,' said Fitzgibbon obscurely.

'Oh, I didn't mean to be rude.'

'What? That's all right. By Jove, what shall we do?'

('We?' thought Noodles. 'What on earth does he mean? He can't think I'd want to do anything with him. Not after that awful business. Oh, I do wish I hadn't seen him.')

'Eh?' said Fitzgibbon, tapping his trouser-leg with his stick, as though they were a boot and a riding-crop. 'Now, look here, Noodles — you haven't got a down on me, have you?'

'Oh, no,' said Noodles, with greater courtesy than truth.

'I admit,' said Fitzgibbon generously, 'that I lost my head at your place. But don't tell me I'm the first fellow to do that.'

Noodles neither confirmed nor denied this assumption.

'I was in a devil of a hole at the time,' added Fitzgibbon, 'and I may have acted like a bit of an outsider. We all do sometimes; don't we?'

'Do we?'

'There you go; laughing at me again.'

'I don't, Mr. Fitzgibbon. Really I don't.'

'"Fitz," please — if you don't mind.'

'Oh, all right. But I promise you I wasn't laughing — Fitz.'

'That's better. I know you're not the kind of girl to bear malice. Are you, now? No, of course you're not. You're a good sort. And if anybody got a raw deal out of it, it was me when I called on that old man. By Jove, he fairly let out at me. Told me you hadn't got a penny, and never would have. By George ——'

'He told you what?' interrupted Noodles. 'But do you mean you went and asked him ——'

'No, no. That's all right.'

'But why did he ——'

'That's all right, I say. That's finished with.'

'Oh,' said Noodles.

Of course she hadn't got a penny, but surely she and Beaky were going to have something some day. What had Mr. Cottenham meant, and why should he tell Fitzgibbon when he'd never told her? She couldn't understand it, but if it were true, then the future was even blacker and emptier and more ghastly than she had thought.

Oh, why had everything suddenly become so absolutely frightful?

Fitzgibbon was speaking. He was saying something about this evening. 'Now, why not?' he was saying.

Belated perception suddenly revealed his earlier remarks.

'Oh, thanks awfully,' said Noodles. 'But I'm afraid I can't.'

'Eh? Why not?'

'Well, I couldn't anyhow — really — but I've got to go somewhere. I can't possibly get out of it.'

'Where?' said Fitzgibbon.

Noodles, looking round like a hunted animal, saw something that Sylvia had seen nearly twenty-four hours ago; the elderly, flat-footed inhabitant still trundling the ancient hand-barrow with the two inclined planes; still endlessly perambulating the streets of his native town with that sprawling invitation to the Pavilion Chalet. As usual, he has managed to impede the other and less obviously superfluous traffic, and he is being addressed with some impatience by a cab-driver from behind and a brewer's drayman from in front. 'Hoy!' they shout, and gesticulate with their arms, and ask where he thinks he is going; and he blinks back at them and butts his barrow into a lamp-post, and reverses it into a bicycle which topples with a metallic clang on to the further pavement. But as well as doing all this — which he has done and is doing without a trace of haste or disturbance — he has also enabled Noodles to deal with a question which she had believed herself incapable of answering. For of course she couldn't explain to Fitzgibbon what a mess she was in.

'There,' she said, pointing to the hand-painted advertisement. 'I've got to go there.'

'What? To the concert-party?' said Fitzgibbon. 'Why? Who's taking you?'

'Nobody. At least . . .'

'Well?'

'Well, I've just *got* to go I'm, afraid. It's all arranged, you see.'

She looked up at Fitzgibbon, as though begging him not to ask any more questions; and Fitzgibbon looked down at her, as though he were amused but not deceived by her answers.

'Well, that's all right, Noodles,' he said. 'I'll come along too.'

'Oh, but ——'

'I'll be there. I'll look out for you. And you'll look out for me, won't you, because —— Well, look here; where are you stopping?'

One couldn't possibly say: 'I won't tell you.'

'There,' said Noodles. 'Just round that corner, I mean. It's called Holmcroft.'

But one wished that one could have thought of a lie.

'Holmcroft,' said Fitzgibbon, nodding. 'Right you are. I'll call for you.'

Bother!

'Oh, but please ——'

'Now, don't make a fuss about nothing. If you don't want me to come in, I'll wait outside. But I don't like little girls going about by themselves, and I'll be there to look after you. And there might be some supper, if you're nice to me. Eh?'

'Oh, thanks awfully, but I'd much ——'

'There, there. We'll talk about that later. We're not going to argue now, are we? Rather not. We're going to be pals again, eh? Now, don't forget. Sorry to leave you an' all that, but I've promised to have a game with a fellow. Fact, I swear. No, don't look so worried, it's only billiards, and there'll be plenty of money left. But round about half-past seven, what? I'll be there, and we'll go to the show together. Eh? Right. That's a deal. So long!'

Mr. Fitzgibbon raised his hat with a gesture of ineffable familiarity and gallantry; winked; saluted with his stick; swung round on his heels, and marched away.

'Beast!' muttered Noodles, gazing after him. 'Oh, why did I speak to him at all? Oh, how on earth am I

going to get away from him? Oh, what *has* happened to all the nice people in the world? Oh, what a fool I've been! Oh, bother! Oh, damn!'

She began walking in the other direction, and walked on and on. Presently she was threading her way through the jostling crowds of Whitsun holiday-makers opposite the entrance to the Pier. Then she was above them, where they were spread thickly all over the beach, as she continued her westerly course along the esplanade. She passed the Majestic Hotel at the far end without seeing it or thinking of it, and certainly without dreaming for a moment that some of the nice people had only left it to drive to Pippingfold. She went further still, to where the esplanade stopped, and the main road turned inland, and a chalky track between the very newest or still half-built villas soared up the side of the huge, greyish-green down. And somewhere beyond this, and at a height from which, if she had chosen, she could have looked right across Newcliff to the distant red blur which was St. Ethelburga's School, her fatigue and hunger became so extreme that she untied her handkerchief and spent the whole of her last remaining sevenpence on chocolate and buns at a weatherbeaten, al fresco hutch — after which she had, literally, to beg for a glass of water from the very grasping old woman who lived in it.

Then she lay for a long time on the turf by the edge of the cliff, though without feeling any happier or more hopeful, or seeing any real reason to suppose that her life would ever emerge from this pit of desolation. And then — since there was no avoiding it — she stood up, and pulled on her hat again, and started doggedly retracing her steps.

Now, if ever, you would have thought, was the time for one of those dismal little songs from her large repertoire of cerulean despair. Now, if ever, you might have said, could she have attuned her melancholy to one of those extremely appropriate canticles.

But we can assure you that as poor Noodles struggled back towards Holmcroft, and Mr. Fitzgibbon, and Mr. Lester Vaughan, without a penny in her handkerchief and with something that each moment seemed more and more like a blister on her heel, poor Noodles had never felt less like singing in the whole of her short and innocuous life.

3

'I see,' said Snubs. And Beaky began to amend his version of the terrible interview again. Each time that he had done so, he had represented himself as saying more and more, and Miss Mulberry as saying less and less, and each time he had glossed over the actual climax which had led to his departure by a wilder and more defiant 'What else could I do?'

'Oh, nothing,' said Snubs, as regularly as the question returned. 'If she'd known anything, of course she'd have told you.'

'Well, that's what I mean.'

'And she couldn't tell you anything?'

'Not a dashed thing.'

'Did you say you'd heard from Noodles?'

'Did I?' Beaky was experiencing the difficulties of all witnesses who repeat themselves, and without the least wish to conceal any really helpful detail was finding his memory more and more untrustworthy.

'No,' he added, frowning and shaking his head. 'I don't think I did.'

'Good,' said Snubs.

'In fact, I'm quite sure I didn't.'

But Snubs didn't say 'Better still,' as his friend seemed to expect. He merely reëchoed that thoughtful, non-committal phrase of two words and four letters.

'I see,' he said.

'Well, what are you going to do?'

'What are we going to do? Keep on at it, I suppose. I didn't really expect much from the school.'

'You didn't, didn't you? Then why the blank dash ——'

'Steady,' said Snubs.

Beaky recalled the important fact that in no version of his scene with Miss Mulberry had he admitted the existence of any strain or impatience. And for this if for no other reason he pulled himself in.

'All right,' he said. 'Only where do we go from here?'

The spot referred to was still the flinty roadway outside St. Ethelburga's front gates, where Gertie — with both members of the Rescue-Party once more on board — was awaiting further instructions.

'Obvious,' said Snubs. 'Back to Newcliff. We've tried Pippingfold; we've tried the school. This is where we start on the pierrots.'

'I suppose so. But I say — how do we find them?'

'Look for them,' said Snubs.

'Where?'

'In their haunts. We'll see how many gangs there are, and we'll take them in turn.'

'I see. And if she's not in Newcliff at all?'

'I'll deal with that point,' said Snubs, 'when it arises. But we needn't be back in London till Tuesday

morning, and Noodles has got to be found. There are ways,' said Snubs, 'and means.'

There was more confidence in his voice than in his heart, for if they drew a blank in Newcliff there was as yet no sort of clue to suggest where they should hunt during the rest of the Whitsun holidays, when pierrots would be emerging from hibernation all round the United Kingdom — not to mention the isles of Wight and Man. But a philosopher deals with his difficulties as they present themselves, and Newcliff was clearly the starting-point.

'We'll get an Amusement Guide,' said Snubs. 'And if there isn't one, we'll ask the porter at one of the hotels. He'll know.'

It was necessary, or at any rate convenient, during the noisy business of turning the two-seater round, to back a short way up St. Ethelburga's drive. And if he hadn't been so fully occupied with that very tricky gear-lever, Mr. Tipton might have observed that his companion was very pale during this part of the trip, and that he pulled his hat very far over his eyes, and hunched his shoulders as high as they would go, and kept passing his tongue over his lips, and trembled rather more than was altogether attributable to Gertie's vibrations. But the basis for these symptoms of terror proved groundless, and no scarlet face or extended forearm protruded from that dreaded bow-window. Gertie roared and rattled, and churned up her own inside and the pebbles on the drive, and shot forth again between the iron gates, and began charging down the hill; and Beaky's shoulders fell into a normal position, and his tongue disappeared, and his hat-brim left the bridge of his nose.

'After all,' he was thinking, 'I did ask her, and she

did answer me. And even old Snubs couldn't have done any more with a woman like that. But, my hat, I'm glad she didn't spot me just then.'

They reëntered the zone of villas, and the zone of stucco terraces, and the zone of little shops. They rejoined the tram-lines. They swerved with them into Pretoria Avenue, and left them again for Martello Street and the front. They tooted their way through the glutinous crowds that swarmed over the broad asphalt. They edged cautiously past the Coronation Clock Tower and the Y.M.C.A. And at the entrance to the Stupendous Hotel — which, as you may or may not remember, rears its hideous bulk opposite the Pier — Gertie's brakes emitted a long-drawn squeal, and Snubs switched off the engine.

'I'm going to try the porter here, anyhow,' he said. 'I mean, if there is an Amusement Guide, he's bound to have it; and if there isn't, then he's pretty well bound to know. And the time is?'

They both consulted their watches.

'Five to six,' said Beaky.

'Five past,' said Snubs. 'You'd better stay here, in case there's any parking trouble. I don't suppose I'll be long.'

In a couple of minutes he was back again.

'The porter was busy,' he said simply; 'so I took this when he wasn't looking.' He unfolded a long, printed sheet. 'You see? Newcliff Attractions for week ending to-day. The theatres we skip. The movie-shows we also pass over. Likewise the Orchestral horrors and the Symphony muck.' (You may remember how thoroughly Mr. Tipton had failed to appreciate the classical quartette at Lady Framlingham's party.) 'But here's what we're after. "Concert-Parties." Now, then.'

The two heads bent together over the bottom of the programme, and Snubs recited it aloud.

'"The Merry Monarchs,"' he said, 'at the Winter Garden. "A Feast of Mirth and Melody." I wonder. And Horace Pereira's Musical Masqueraders at —— Oh, no. They don't kick off till next week. Still, we'd better bear 'em in mind, because they may be lurking about somewhere — curse them. And — I say, shift your thumb, old man.'

Beaky shifted his thumb.

'"The Diamond Dominoes,"' Snubs continued. 'Whatever that means. "Lester Vaughan and All-Star Company at the Pavilion Chalet." And that's the lot.'

'Noodles isn't a star,' said her brother decidedly.

'I wouldn't count on that,' said Snubs. 'Have you ever heard of Lester Vaughan?'

'Well, no. Yes, I see what you mean.'

'We'll have a shot at them all,' said Snubs. 'It's no good not doing this properly. And we'll start with the Winter Garden, because I can see it over there. Come on.'

'What?' said Beaky vaguely.

Of course he had got her on the brain, but the girl in that big car that had just whizzed past them had — for a second — looked extraordinarily like Sylvia. Only it couldn't be. It was out of the question. Reason and experience both cried out against such a coincidence, just as they told him that the very last place to look for Mrs. Shirley during a Bank-Holiday week-end was in the thick of the Bank-Holiday crowds. And he'd only seen the back of the girl's head. And if he'd yelled at her, she wouldn't have heard him. And it wasn't Sylvia, anyhow, so thank

Heaven he hadn't yelled. And if it had been Sylvia and he had yelled, then what on earth could he have said if she had stopped?

'I say — did you get my letter?'

Quite impossible.

Besides, once more, it wasn't Sylvia and it couldn't be Sylvia. It was just some other horrible girl who had the monstrous impertinence to look rather like her from a long way off. It was just a glimpse of a hat that had set his heart beating and had choked him and had turned his limbs to water.

'I wish I had yelled,' he muttered. 'No, I don't, though.'

'What's that?' said Snubs. 'What's the matter?'

'Nothing. Are you going to ask here, or am I?'

'Both,' said Snubs. 'This way.'

They left Gertie in a whitewashed sanctuary which distinctly said that there was parking space for five private cars, and ducked under the railings, and descended some steps, and walked up to the front entrance of the Winter Garden — which was closed.

'To-night at eight,' it said. 'Tickets from Webster's Library.'

'Let's try the back,' said Snubs.

The back was locked and padlocked.

Nevertheless they knocked and hammered on it until they had collected a fair-sized gathering of children and adults, and a chorus of remarkably vocal dogs. Then a good-natured man in a panama came up and told them that the door was locked, but if it was tickets they wanted ——

'It isn't,' they said, and the good-natured man looked frightened and left them. And the other adults looked suspicious, and began murmuring. So that

there was nothing to do but to walk away, trying to appear as if one had never knocked or hammered in one's life.

'We'll have to come back later,' said Snubs. 'Meanwhile there are the other places.'

The Grotto, where Horace Pereira's Musical Masqueraders were due on Whit-Monday, was more than half a mile away, and there could be no hurrying through the vast, tired, hot, and aimless crowds that surged indefatigably over the roadway. Yet they got there eventually, and they actually found a man who must have had some connection with it, because although he wasn't exactly doing anything, he was dressed in overalls and had a mop and a screwdriver.

He was, however, one of the most ignorant and ill-informed men that they had ever met. He had been sent here, he said, by the boss, and the boss might know when the place would be open again, but that was the boss's affair. The boss, he added, on being further pressed, lived somewhere outside the town, but he didn't rightly know where. He couldn't say if anybody had been using the 'All. Well, they might 'ave. You never could tell. He remembered that they'd lent it to the Boy Scouts once; during the war, that was. At least, so he'd 'eard.

No, he didn't know nothing about no pierrots. But — with a gleam of quite illusory intelligence — if the gentlemen cared to come back on Monday, the boss might be around. Only — the gleam vanishing into a dull glaze — you never could rightly tell.

Here Snubs forced his way past him, and entering the Grotto itself found it in such an indescribable state of dirt, dust, mildew, stuffiness, and confusion as made it not only unthinkable that any living crea-

ture had occupied it for months, but almost unimaginable that the Musical Masqueraders could hope to open before Boxing-Day.

'If Noodles is with this lot,' he reported, as he came out again, 'then we'll have to look for them somewhere else. Perhaps I could get a list of lodgings from one of the theatres; but the next move is the Pavilion Chalet.'

So they left the Grotto and the man with the mop — who, needless to say, was quite unable to direct them except by landmarks of which they had never heard. And they took further, and curiously divergent, opinions from a man in a blue jersey and a man with a bath-chair. And they asked a taxi-driver, and an errand-boy, and a postman, and no less than four persons who said that they were strangers themselves. And somehow or other, in spite of all these aids and obstacles, they did at last drive down a narrow lane between a brewery and a bakery, and emerged on a triangular open space which looked like a forgotten village-green. And there, opposite them, were the galvanized-iron walls and roof, and the peeling paintwork, and the tattered bunting of the Pavilion Chalet itself. And it was closed.

Undoubtedly it was closed. But they got out again, and walked round it, and battered on all the doors, and did their best to peer in at the boarded-up windows. Again, also, a good-natured bystander drew their attention to the fact that the place was shut, and reminded them that it was still only just past seven.

'If you want to take tickets ——' he said.

But they made it particularly clear that they didn't, and the good-natured man walked away backwards, looking both mistrustful and huffy.

'I'm for waiting,' said Snubs. 'If they start at eight, someone's bound to be along soon. What do you say?'

Beaky, who had been studying one of the printed bills, said that Noodles's name was conspicuous by its absence, and that he was hellishly hungry. 'If you ask me,' he added, 'she isn't in this rotten town at all.'

Snubs said that this remained to be proved. The bills were obviously old bills, and she might just as well be here as anywhere else.

Beaky submitted the alternative proposition that she might just as well be anywhere else as here, and added, again, that his stomach was caving in.

Snubs aired some general views on the greed of people who had lunched at three in the afternoon.

Beaky advanced the opinion that the foul snack with which he had undermined his system at the hour in question had merely served to increase his pangs. Some people, he said, might be camels or ostriches, but personally he was neither.

Snubs suggested that they hadn't set out on this expedition for the purpose of what he described as guzzling.

Beaky replied that this truth had been self-evident from the very beginning, but that it would be dashed funny if he fainted. He begged his companion to behave like a human being.

Snubs said that he never behaved like anything else, but if they went off and fed now, they might just as well have stayed in London, because they couldn't go barging into the pierrots while they were doing what he characterized as their stuff. They'd got to catch them before the show started.

'But,' said Beaky, 'there's a place just over there . . .'

And he pointed, and Snubs's eyes followed the direction of his feeble and famished hand, and sure enough there was a shop-window which from this distance looked extraordinarily succulent. 'The Pavilion Creamery,' it said on the awning. 'Teas, Luncheons, and Dinners.' The order was frankly ominous, but the words were irresistible. For all his obstinacy and philosophy, Mr. Tipton's mouth began to water. And yet . . .

'Oh, come on,' said Beaky faintly. 'We must have something, and it's only just across the street.'

Snubs weakened visibly.

'And nobody could possibly mind your leaving Gertie here. You know they couldn't.'

Snubs gave way.

'All right,' he said. 'We'll try and get a table near the window. Only do remember we'll probably have to tackle the Winter Garden too.'

But Beaky was already stumbling across the worn grass, with a wild and ravenous light in his eyes. Snubs gave a last look at Gertie, and a last look at the barred entrance to the Pavilion Chalet, and followed swiftly in his wake.

4

Like Asmodeus, that invaluable fiend, the chronicler soars into the empyrean and peers down at his characters through a great number of temporarily transparent roofs. In the big dining-room at the Majestic Hotel he sees Mrs. and Miss Shirley seated at a little round table. They are eating and drinking with one eye on the clock, for Carter has been ordered for ten minutes to eight, and it will never do for Mrs. Shirley to keep him waiting — just as it will never do for Sylvia to miss a moment of the Diamond Dominoes.

'What are you thinking about, Mummie?'

'Nothing, darling.'

'You don't mind coming to-night?'

'No, of course not.'

'Is it the garden, then? Because I thought it looked perfect.'

'No, I wasn't thinking about the garden.'

'It's me, then, I suppose?'

'Well, partly.'

'You're not worried about me, darling, are you? Because I'm awfully sensible.'

'I know you are.'

'And nothing's happened — yet.'

'I know it hasn't.'

'But if it did?'

'Well, I'd be on your side, of course. But you might have to wait.'

'Money, you mean?'

'Well, it's rather important.'

'Oh, dear. I wish I hadn't told you.'

'But I knew.'

'Well, I suppose you did. But perhaps he won't — say anything.'

Mrs. Shirley makes a face across the little round table which mocks at such a preposterous idea. And Sylvia makes another face the significance of which is washed away by a tremendous blush. And they both laugh. And Sylvia says she supposes she's an awful girl, but one can't behave like people in books, and anyhow (she says) she's thankful that she's told someone.

'Someone?'

'Well, you, of course, darling. I'd never dream of telling anyone else.'

Undoubtedly we have no business to be listening to

this conversation, or intercepting those glances under the red-silk candle-shades, and we turn away and look round the big dining-room for signs of Mrs. Millet. But Mrs. Millet has gone back to her London hotel, after all. Whitsun is no protection for her gas-bag of a lawyer, and she has tracked him down on the telephone and is giving him several large pieces of her mind. It would do a lot of young barristers a power of good to hear him yielding on point after point, yet yield he does — even though it means giving up his Sunday golf. But she calls him by a Christian name which he has practically forgotten, and of course no young barrister could conceivably do a thing like that.

Shifting our position, we look down on the sitting-room at Holmcroft. Miss La Touche and Miss Selbrook have gorged on cold sausage and éclairs and, of course, pickles, and have drunk deep of the Saturday night stout. But Noodles has hardly touched her share of the spread, for she is in the distressing condition of being extremely hungry and having absolutely no appetite. At any moment she expects to hear Mr. Fitzgibbon's rap on the door, and to have to explain him to her fellow-lodgers, and — hardly less difficult — to explain them to him. And if she survives that, how can she possibly make Mr. Vaughan understand that she is leaving him, when he never listens to anything that she says? And when she owes him all that money, and can't pay it? And when he's the only person who can possibly lend her more money for the bill at these horrible lodgings?

And all the time he's really expecting her to dress up and do Heaven knows what, for even if he does listen to her he can't reëngage Miss Dolores at a moment's notice. And everyone will stare at her, and

wonder what on earth she's there for, and it will be exactly like the nightmare where you're suddenly asked to do something that you've never done in your life, and they all hoot at you when you can't do it.

And when that's over — if it ever is — there'll still be Fitzgibbon, but there'll be nothing and nobody else, and sooner than be helped by Fitzgibbon, she'll — she'll . . .

Mercifully, the vision fades. We catch a glimpse of Fitzgibbon himself, redder than ever after the refreshment required to support him during nearly five hours' billiards, leaning against the bar-counter of the Black Horse Shades, and dining frugally off cloves, coffee-berries, cinnamon, and potato-chips. We wish, with all the strength at our command, that he wouldn't keep looking at that gold watch of his, or that the pawnbroker from whom he has recently recovered it had been inspired to tamper with the works. We wish . . .

But we're looking down on another scene now. The interior of the Pavilion Creamery, with its imitation marble-top tables, and its imitation tiled walls, and its imitation mosaic floor. And its small stock of cream, and its large stock of mass-produced and semi-petrified delicatessen, and its still larger stock of empty tins and cardboard containers and glass bottles which are piled in decorative pyramids, and are then duplicated (and slightly distorted) by the skilful use of mirrors. And its hissing, nickel-plated pillar from which jets of scalding water can produce, at a moment's notice, equally tasteless cups of tea, coffee, cocoa or even soup. And its ancient and sinister wooden bucket from which courageous customers can be supplied with a strange and liquescent substitute for ice-cream. And its to-

tems or symbolical emblems in the shape of a golden cow under a glass dome and a china stork which has broken its beak in the effort to consume a china frog. And its two female attendants habited in white overalls which are so very far from white. And its scanty clientèle munching mournfully and gulping gloomily, and endlessly shifting its hard little chairs in the search for some spot where all four legs shall touch the ground at the same time.

And nowhere near the window — because this part of the Creamery is filled with the counter and the hat-racks — Messrs. R. H. Brett and W. G. Tipton crouching uncomfortably at the same wobbling table, and eating what they haven't ordered and very much doubt if they can digest, and drinking that which rather suffocates than quenches, and continually twisting their arms so as to consult their watches, or their necks so as to keep an eye, as far as possible, on Gertie and the Pavilion Chalet.

The Pavilion Chalet, however, is still apparently deserted, and no queue has yet formed outside its undignified entrance. While Gertie, though a closer inspection shows us that she has not altogether overcome her tendency to lubricate the roadway, has attracted neither policemen nor thieves.

But we cannot say that we quite take to her singularly mulish expression. She is obviously thinking of something, as she stands there with such ironical patience, and Gertie's thoughts — if we may say so in her master's temporary absence — are hardly ever pleasant ones. She has been amazingly docile ever since she left Great Wissingfield, but let no one suppose that this represents a genuine change of heart. As we watch her, guardedly, we hope that she is still con-

gratulating herself on her behaviour earlier in the day, but we feel far from certain that she isn't plotting fresh mischief. 'Let me see,' she seems to be saying; 'I've tried the puncture and the leaky sump, and a pretty good job I made of them; but can't I think of something more original? It'll be getting dark soon, and I might have some fun with the lighting. Or how about the ignition? If I got a really rough bit of road again, I think I could manage to earth that frayed cable from the distributor. Or what about something really meaty? After all, it seems a pity to waste a public holiday like this, when everything's closed till Tuesday, and you can just whistle for spare parts. Big-end? Well, I must think it over.'

We leave her, also; distinctly alienated by this glimpse of her ungracious soul. And again we swoop into the sky, shivering a little as we note how the offshore breeze has strengthened in the last few minutes, and how the sea is no longer blue and glassy but grey and uneasy, and how the hills behind the town are topped by a low, black cloud that has come hurrying from the north as it heard of the Biggest Exodus on Record — determined to keep its punctual appointment with the millions who know it so well. Having got as far as this, though, it is for the moment in no hurry to come further. It likes to lie there, piling up its reënforcements and slowly becoming darker and more massive; savouring its own unpopularity in advance, and ruminating on the best method of causing the greatest inconvenience to the largest number of people in this ridiculous, unsuspecting little town. It may even go away again, and return on Monday when the town will be fuller and more vulnerable than ever. Meanwhile it likes to wait there and chuckle to itself,

and to hoard its resources for the deluge in which it will perish so gloriously for the honour of its odious family. Will its epitaph be the headline, 'Another Bank-Holiday Ruined,' or will it be unable to resist its own growing impatience, so that it rains itself out during this very night?

It doesn't know yet, and no more do we. But we haven't come up here to look at anything so vast or impersonal as a dark cloud. Down we plunge, and this time we pierce the opacity of a slate roof and two jerry-built ceilings, and focus the beam of our penetrating gaze on a new and strange sitting-room in some old and ordinary lodgings. The man standing there and gesticulating so clumsily and inexpressively is instantly recognizable as Mr. Lester Vaughan. But who is the large woman facing him? Wait a moment. Perhaps we shall place her if we listen.

'I've told you a hundred times,' Mr. Vaughan is saying — but wearily and desperately, 'that you brought the whole thing on yourself. Where'd I have been if I'd just waited like you seem to expect? Don't you realize I'm in this up to the collar-stud, and if it fizzles, I'm bust?'

'Well, why did you get in an amachoor?'

'Blank in dash, Maisie, have I got to explain everything that I do to a girl who walks out and tries to smash the show? I had to get *someone*, didn't I?'

'You could have listened to me first.'

'Well, I *am* listening to you, aren't I? Here I am, dog-tired after two long rides and a lot of work on a very important play, and you come in and start arguing while I'm trying to eat.'

'Well, I've apologized, haven't I?'

'All right. You've apologized, and I've explained. Now, what else do you want?'

'What else do I want?'

'Yes, what else do you want?'

We cannot help being struck at this point by the influence on Mr. Vaughan and Miss Dolores — for the large woman's identity is now clearly established — of their long familiarity with concert-party dialogue. But whereas on the stage such a triple repetition would be the prelude to some ancient and whiskered jest, here the resemblance suddenly breaks down. It is with anything but a smile or an ogle that Miss Dolores announces what she wants.

'I want,' she says, passionately, 'to wring that new girl's neck!'

'What!'

'Yes!'

'Why?'

'I'll tell you why, Lester. Because she's taking the bread out of my mouth and the clothes off my back. See? Because you know perfectly well I never meant to leave you really — only I happen to be a bit quick-tempered. Because I've always put the show first, wherever I've been, and they all know it, and here's an amachoor who's going to let you down, and — oh, yes, she is; don't tell me — and all because shall I tell you why? All right, I'll tell you why. Because she's got round you and played up to you and vamped you with those eyes I've heard about' (here Mr. Vaughan quite unconsciously glances at his reflection in the overmantel, and fingers his tie) — 'and because — oh, yes, you are; don't tell me — because you're soft on her!'

The stream of logic is suddenly checked. The Chief Domino's indignation is a sight to behold, and little he cares now about the looking-glass or his tie.

'Me!' he snorts. 'Me soft on a kid like that! Who's been feeding you, Maisie? Who's been spilling this stuff? Eh? Where ——'

'Oh, I'm not afraid of you. They're all saying it.'

'Blank in dash, who'd be a manager!'

'They're all saying she can't do a thing.'

'Well, how was I to know that? You'd let me down ——'

'Haven't I apologized?'

'Apologized!'

'Yes, haven't I apologized? Listen, Lester, I'm clean on the rocks. Listen — I'll take anything you like. Listen — I'll go right on to-night, and I'll never say another word about our argument. Listen — I mean it, Lester. Listen — I know you're not soft on her, really . . .'

'Ah!'

'And, Lester, how's the play going? You know I'm dead keen on it. Lester — you might tell me . . .'

Mr. Vaughan has now retired into a dark cloud of his own. He rubs his sallow jaw. He stares mistily at the unspeakable wallpaper. His armour, which has never been of the highest proof, cannot defend him against that inquiry about the play. Maisie's a good sort, too. She understands. And if she'll really come back on a smaller salary . . . Well, what does that matter? She's got to come back. She's one of them, and that other girl — no, she'll never be any good. Too damned meek and ladylike. No idea of anything. Hopeless.

She can go. As she has no contract, she can go all the quicker. He ought never to have engaged her, and he wouldn't have, what's more, if only . . .

A vague memory of something to do with swimming and something to do with a stringed-instrument

merely irritates the great man. He shakes them aside with a movement of his shoulders.

Soft, indeed! Well, he can stop that sort of talk, and pretty sharp. And the girl won't argue.

That clinches it. The girl isn't here and won't argue. Maisie is only a yard away, and will.

'All right, Maisie. That's all right. Kiss and be friends. You can have the old salary.'

'Oh, Lester! Oh, you darling!'

Ugh! Gosh, they really are going to kiss.

They've kissed. Revolting! But Noodles is free, so what does it matter?

We long to tell her, but not even now can we interfere with the characters who are swiftly approaching the spot where Gertie stands in sardonic solitude, and sneers at human frailty. Noodles must drink the cup as it is offered her; but we are dashed if we are going to hover up here any longer and listen to Mr. Vaughan telling Miss Dolores (née Davis) about the knock-out situation which he and his collaborator have devised for the new curtain of the second act.

We have already, unfortunately, gathered that it has something to do with a man hiding in an ottoman, and another man hiding in a suit of armour, but that's quite enough for us. With even less regret than in the case of Miss Mulberry, we bid farewell to the Diamond Dominoes for good.

5

'Well,' said Fitzgibbon; 'I've kept my word, you see.'

'Oh, yes,' said Noodles.

'I didn't forget, you see. Here I am.'

And there he was. He hadn't knocked on the

stained-glass door at Holmcroft for the very good reason that Noodles had seen him through the window, and had run out to meet him. And this she had done for what, at the time, had seemed the very good reason that it would stop Miss Selbrook and Miss La Touche asking who he was. Only afterwards this second reason didn't seem quite so admirable, because it also meant that Fitzgibbon looked as if he thought that she thought he was late.

'Sorry if I've kept you waiting,' he said. 'Still, here I am.'

And there he still was — sort of smiling in a sort of horrible sort of way.

'Oh, yes,' said Noodles.

'Lots of time, though,' said Fitzgibbon. 'The show doesn't start till eight.'

'Yes, I know. But I ought to get there a bit sooner.'

'Why?'

'Well, you see . . .'

'Oh, rot, Noodles. You're just saying that to rag me. Aren't you?'

'No, really not. And really I ——'

'What's the idea? You're going with someone else?'

'Oh, no. But I mustn't be late, because . . .'

'Well? All right; you're coming with me, then. I'll treat you, if you like.'

The natural thing was to say, 'Oh, thanks awfully,' and Noodles had said it before she could stop herself. 'Only, I mean ——' she added.

'I'll tell you what you mean,' said Fitzgibbon. 'We'll go for a little walk first.'

When he was in this sort of ordering-about mood, he really was the most difficult man to explain things

to. On the other hand there was a terrible temptation to postpone the interview with Mr. Vaughan as long as it could be postponed. Also, Fitzgibbon had started walking away — and it was rude as well as impossible not to go with him — without waiting for his plan to be discussed.

But one could clear up one point.

'I wonder,' said Noodles, 'if you could tell me the time?'

'Eh?' Fitzgibbon stopped, and pulled out his gold watch, and looked at it, and lied with quite unnecessary skill.

'Barely twenty past,' he said, and instantly repocketed the watch. 'We'll go round by the front, what? It won't take more than ten minutes or so, and I'll see we're not late. Come on, Noodles.'

So Noodles came on. Already her heel was beginning to hurt her again, but unless she explained everything . . . Well, that was out of the question. Far better to limp along with Fitzgibbon than to start telling him things. Because if he wanted to help — and of course he would — then it would only make it all far worse than ever. She must try and give him the slip, somehow, when they actually got to the Pavilion Chalet.

Though that wasn't going to be very easy, either . . .

Fortunately, in one way, and less fortunately in another, Fitzgibbon's idea of walking was to dawdle along, and to keep stopping and looking into shop windows. He kept offering to purchase their contents in the most princely and sickening fashion, and Noodles had to keep on thanking him and repulsing his generosity. Then he seemed to forget all about their destination, and wanted to take her on the pier. And when she had reminded him, he forgot again, and wanted to take her for a drive.

'But I *must* go to the pierrots,' she said. 'I told you I must.'

'There's something in this,' said Fitzgibbon. 'What's the idea?'

'Well, I've got to.'

'You've said that. But who is he?'

'Who's who?'

'Aha!'

'What do you mean?'

'We'll see,' said Fitzgibbon archly. But to her mental, though not to her physical, relief, he suddenly increased his pace.

'This way,' he said. And a little later: 'Why, what's the matter with your foot?'

'My shoe hurts,' said Noodles.

'Poor dear,' said Fitzgibbon. 'Take my arm.'

'Oh, no, thanks. Really it's all right.'

They were almost there now.

'Why won't you take my arm?' asked Fitzgibbon. 'I say, don't you like me?'

'Oh, please!'

'Oh, please!' said Fitzgibbon. 'What does that mean? I say, Noodles, I believe you've got a down on me.'

'Oh, no, really I haven't.'

'You like me, then? Eh?'

'Oh, please ——'

'There you go,' said Fitzgibbon. '"Oh, please!" all the time. 'S that the way to treat a pal? Here!'

'What?'

'Here!'

He caught hold of her arm. He was suddenly far more awful even than he had been at Pippingfold. He was terrifying. His face was larger, and redder, and

more like the worst sort of animal. And he was hurting her. And she knew that people were beginning to stare at them.

'Oh, do please let go. Mr. Fitzgibbon — please!'

But he didn't let go. He made a sort of thick, growling noise in his throat. And — oh, dear! — it must be far later than he'd said, because there was quite a crowd going in at the front of the Pavilion Chalet, and of course Mr. Vaughan would be furious that she hadn't turned up, and that would make it more difficult than ever.

'Oh, please ——'

'Arrh — you little ——'

'*Hi!* Stop that!'

Whose was this chivalrous and embarrassing voice? Noodles turned her head quickly — just as Fitzgibbon dived at it with his coarse lips, and the next moment he was jerked backwards, and she had very nearly fallen on top of him. But he let go just in time, and she staggered to her feet. As in a dream she saw her brother standing and gaping at her, and Snubs Tipton — yes, of course it was Snubs — gripping Fitzgibbon by the scruff and striking him simultaneously on the nose.

'Oh, Snubs!' she cried. 'Don't hurt him!'

Thud! went Snubs's fist again.

'What ——' said Fitzgibbon, looking extremely puzzled and surprised.

Thud!

'Oh, stop, Snubs! That's enough!'

Snubs looked round, grinned encouragingly, shook Fitzgibbon in the most energetic and delightful manner, pushed him forward so that he was more or less balanced on his own feet again, further assisted his

equilibrium by kicking him violently on the hind-quarters, and then turned his back on him as though such ideas as revenge or retaliation had never been invented. But it seemed that he was right, for though Noodles drew in her breath to scream a warning, Fitzgibbon was already stumbling away as fast as he could go. The whole episode had taken little more than ten seconds, and to judge by the look of blank calm with which Mr. Tipton favoured the few eye-witnesses, had never taken place at all.

'There,' he said, brushing his hands together. 'Now, come along, Noodles. We're taking you out of this.'

'Oh, Snubs!'

'What?'

'Did he hurt you?'

'Oh, buck up,' said Beaky, whose self-conscious nervousness was almost convincing the eye-witnesses that there had been a fight after all. 'Don't stop and ask questions. We've found you, and you've got to come.'

'What? Where?'

'In Snubs's car. There it is. Hurry up.'

'But ——'

'Come on, Noodles.'

She could have resisted her brother's twittering orders, but Snubs's quiet voice had got to be obeyed. If Snubs said 'Come on' like that, then the Diamond Dominoes no longer existed. With another grateful yet anxious look she moved towards Gertie, and Snubs, running ahead of her, actually succeeded in opening the near-side door.

'Hop in,' he said.

She got in, and he ran round and climbed over the other door and sat down beside her. A creaking of

springs and a rattling of hardware showed that Beaky was clambering into the dickey and trying to make room for his legs.

'All right?' said Snubs, over his shoulder. 'Right.'

Once again Gertie's self-starter whirred, and her engine roared. Perhaps they wouldn't have been so obliging if she had had a little more warning, but as a hasty improvisation she could still play a very old and irritating card.

'Dash!' said Snubs, as he heaved and tugged at the gear-lever. At each effort the most appallingly destructive rumpus came from the cogs in the gear box, but it seemed that no set could be prevailed on to do anything but fight angrily with the others. He kept stamping on the clutch, accelerating, throttling down, and trying again. The vibration was terrific. The noise indescribable.

So the couple on the front seat neither saw nor heard Mr. Brett rise suddenly to his full height, and wave his arms, and bleat an anguished appeal.

'Sylvia!' he was shouting. 'Sylvia! I say — *Sylvia!*'

The great Carter sped past and slowed down. But Sylvia had seen, or heard. She was waving out of the window.

'Wait!' yelled Beaky, gesticulating more urgently and excitedly than ever. He had forgotten all about the impossibility of saying anything to the adored one if he met her, because he had met her — or practically — and there was no room for anything in his soul but a wild happiness and relief, or in his body for anything but his soaring, bursting heart.

He stepped on to the seat of the dickey. He planted one foot on the back wing as he prepared to jump to the ground. He waved again.

At this moment the battered teeth of Gertie's first speed suddenly met and engaged. She leapt forward like a greyhound. Beaky turned almost a complete somersault in the air, and struck the road with the back of his neck.

He kicked twice, and lay absolutely still.

'My gosh!' thought Snubs, as he settled himself more comfortably and roared away towards the tramlines. 'I've never known her pull better with three on board.'

But Sylvia was kneeling beside the unconscious Beaky, with a face even whiter than his own. And as the great Carter came rushing forward to help, he distinctly heard her calling the young gentleman 'darling.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Adventures with Gertie — And the nobility of Snubs

SNUBS said: 'We got your letter, you see. We were a bit worried. But it's all right now?'

Noodles nodded.

'That fellow'd been drinking, you know,' said Snubs. 'You ought to have known that.'

'Ought I?'

'Well, I'm glad we turned up. Was he the one?'

'Which one, Snubs?'

'The pierrot, I mean.'

'Oh, no. That was —— I mean, the pierrot was quite a different one.'

'Good Lord!' said Snubs. 'Then who was the fellow you were with?'

'Well, he was the one that got me sent back to school. I — I don't know whether you heard. But, Snubs, it was all a mistake. Really it was.'

'Of course,' said Snubs. 'He turned up again, then?'

How understanding he was.

'Yes. And it's so difficult to be rude, Snubs.'

'Oh, I know. Not for me, though. I'd have been ruder still, if I'd known.'

'Oh, Snubs!'

'Well, I would. I'd have kicked him twice. But, I say — what happened to the pierrot?'

'Oh, Snubs — it's awful. I forgot all about him, and he was expecting me. Do you think we ought to go back?'

'No,' said Snubs, and Gertie went a little faster.

'I was going to leave them anyhow,' said Noodles, 'and I'm sure they didn't want me. But —— Oh, and there's something else. I never paid the bill at my lodgings. And I've no idea how much it is. And then there was the money I borrowed. Oh, dear!'

'That's all right.'

'But it isn't. I *must* pay them.'

'Of course. But you can easily send it.'

'But you don't understand, Snubs. I haven't got it. I haven't got anything at all. Not even a penny.'

'What do you mean? Of course Mr. Cottenham will give it you.'

'Lend it me, do you mean? But I couldn't pay him back, either.'

'Lend? What are you talking about? Don't you have an allowance?'

'Well, I did. A little one, I mean. But Mr. Cottenham told — told someone that I hadn't really got any money at all. And if that's true ——'

'Rubbish. Of course it isn't true, Noodles. We'il ask Beaky.'

Without removing his eyes from the road in front of him, he raised his voice.

'Beaky!' he shouted.

There was no answer.

'Beaky! I say!'

Still no answer. Noodles looked over her shoulder.

'Oh, Snubs! Oh, stop at once!'

'What?'

'He's not there!'

'What!'

They slowed down, and the driver wrenched his head round. They stopped, and he twisted the whole upper portion of his body, bracing his extended legs against the pedals.

'Well, I'm dashed,' he said, and collapsed on the seat again. 'What made him do that?'

Even as he put this question, the answer came to him. He knew that Beaky had got in, and it was absurd to suppose that he had fallen out. Therefore he had got out. And he had got out because the quest was over, and the quickest way back to Wykeham Street — and the day's postal deliveries — was by train. Proceeding further, and at incredible speed, on this line of reasoning, he saw that his old friend had solved the difficulty of explaining this course of action to his sister by not explaining it at all. He had just skipped and bolted for the station, knowing that Snubs both could and would do the rest. Yet if this confidence were faintly flattering, it was also confoundedly embarrassing.

'What is it, Snubs? Have you remembered something?'

'Yes,' said Snubs. 'I mean, no. But Beaky's all right. He — he'd got something rather important on, and I — I suppose he couldn't wait.'

'You're not making that up?'

'Oh, no. Oh, Lord, no.'

'What is it, Snubs? Do tell me!'

'Oh, well,' said Snubs; ''s a matter of fact, he was expecting a letter.'

'Where? Who from?'

'In London. I'm not quite ——'

But the attempted prevarication never reached the Recording Angel's tablets, to be entered either as a loyal lie or as something less creditable.

'In London?' cried Noodles. 'But, Snubs — aren't *we* going to London?'

'What?'

'Isn't that where you're taking me?'

'Good Lord, no. I'm taking you back to Pippingfold.'

And of course he was taking her back to Pippingfold, where of course the old boy would have to receive her whether he wanted to or not, and whether he were staying there or going abroad. But Noodles had clutched his left arm, and was staring at him with a look of misery and terror; and, worse still, of reproach.

'Oh, Snubs,' she said, 'I can't go there. Oh, Snubs, you don't know what it was like. And it would be worse than ever, after this. Oh, Snubs, darling, *please* mayn't I go back and stay with you and Beaky? Oh, *please*, mayn't I?'

Snubs stared back at her, tingling all over with unidentifiable emotions.

'To Wyke-Wykeham Street?' he burbled. 'But ——'

'But I thought that was what you meant. Oh, Snubs, I'd hardly eat anything, and I'd sleep anywhere, and I'd do anything you told me, and I'd go to an office if they'd have me — but I *can't* go on living at Pippingfold. You know I can't.'

'But it's your home,' said Snubs feebly.

'It's not. It's never been my home. I hate it. At least, I don't hate *it*, but Mr. Cottenham won't ever —— Oh, can't you understand how awful it is? And he'll be furious at all the things I've done, and he'll try and send me back to school again, and I know they won't have me. Oh, Snubs — *please* . . .'

Snubs's mouth twitched. But what would happen if he brought Noodles back to Wykeham Street in the middle of the night, and if — as was quite possible — Beaky weren't there? Even if he went and slept somewhere else, how could he possibly defend his conduct

when Pippingfold was so much nearer and more obvious? Of course he couldn't. And of course the Burgesses would make a fuss. And of course he would have achieved nothing but an infinitely worse problem to be dealt with to-morrow morning.

'I can't, Noodles,' he muttered. 'I must take you back to your guardian.'

'Oh, Snubs . . .'

'For to-night, anyhow.'

'But that'll be far the worst night,' said Noodles.

'I know. But I'll — I'll do something. I don't quite know what. But I'll get hold of Beaky, and if you really can't stand it —— Noodles! What's the matter?'

'Don't look,' said Noodles, turning her head away.

'But ——'

'Don't look! I'll kill you if you look at me. Go on at once! Take me back quickly, and leave me. I quite understand. Nobody wants me, and nobody ever will. But I don't mind that, if only you'll ——'

She smote the steering-wheel, unable to get another word past the tears that were choking her, but indicating her desperate wish to resume the journey. And as Snubs could think of nothing else to do or say, he resumed it. It was getting darker now, and he leant forward to switch on the lights. But his detached, mechanical satisfaction in their steady beam was checked almost at once by something else that they revealed as well as the undulating road to Friar's Holt. And this was a couple — no, three — no, a dozen large drops of water on the wind-screen.

He looked up at the inky sky, and was greeted by a further flurry of warm, stinging pellets.

'Look here, Noodles,' he said, 'you'd better have my

coat. I don't think it's going to be much, but ——'

'No, thank you.'

'You've got to have it.'

'I'm not cold, thank you.'

'I dare say; but it's raining.'

He stopped Gertie again, and took off his coat.

'Here you are,' he said.

'I don't want it, thank you.'

'Yes, you do.'

'I don't.'

Snubs draped the coat over her shoulders, and left it there. She never moved nor spoke. The rain steadily increased.

'Lean forward a bit,' said Snubs. 'I'm going to put the hood up.'

This time she obeyed, but when he climbed back into his seat — after the successful conclusion of a very violent struggle — the coat had slipped off again.

'Now, look here, Noodles,' he said; 'you've *got* to wear that coat. Do you hear me?'

'What?'

As she hadn't, apparently, heard him, he lifted the coat once more and once more hung it over her. And this time he managed to do up one of the buttons.

'It's not going to help,' he said, 'if you get wet through.'

No answer.

He tried to look at her, but he could see nothing. The best thing to do seemed to be to start moving again; but he could no longer keep up his former speed. The arm of the screen-wiper having snapped off several weeks ago, it was necessary to keep leaning over the side to see where they were going, and each time the rain beat more fiercely in his face, while his right arm

was rapidly becoming saturated. It is possible that the big, dark cloud had merely meant to have a little private practice before its grand assault on the holiday crowds, but having once begun it was clearly losing all control. It didn't care now whether it exhausted its resources or not — even though to-morrow and Monday should be as fine as to-day. All it wanted was to see how quickly it could turn the roads into rivers, and the fields into bogs, and the whole night into one hissing, streaming, penetrating wetness. And so far as these objects were concerned, it was certainly doing wonders.

'By Jove,' shouted Snubs — for the wind had risen to add to the noise — 'this is getting rather awkward. I'm afraid it's coming in rather a lot.'

Still no answer from the motionless figure by his side. But a sudden rumbling roar that might have been a train — if they were anywhere near a railway — or might have been thunder. Only where was the lightning?

Zip! Gertie shot sideways and straightened out again, as the whole countryside was illuminated by a blinding flash. Was anyone asking where the lightning was? Well, that was the lightning. And that. Rumble — boom — crash. And that.

'Oh, Snubs! Oh, please go slower!'

'What?'

'Oh, Snubs! Do be careful. I don't like this at all. Oh, Snubs, I'm sorry I was so rude, but —— *Oh!*'

'It's all right, Noodles.'

'It isn't! I know we're going to be struck.'

'No, we're not.'

'Oh, I've always hated this sort of thing. Oh, do look out where you're going!'

'Of course I'm ——'

He set his teeth. He held that savage, jerking steering-wheel with all the strength of which he was capable. He pushed with both his feet until he was right off the seat. 'Sit tight!' he yelled, as Gertie bounced and leapt over the grass. There was a scraping and crashing noise as her front axle and undershield demolished a pile of flints. Then she seemed to leave the ground altogether. She lurched to the left; bounced again; lurched to the right; tipped forward; hit something else; tipped backward; oscillated violently with a protest from every spring, nut, and rivet in her entire anatomy. And as a very beautiful display of forked lightning once more lit up the trees and hedges and the sheets of streaming water, a small branch came in and whipped off Mr. Tipton's hat. Looking angrily round, he was amazed to see the road on the level of his shoulders, and the bush which had just attacked him between himself and the road.

A reasonable deduction seemed to be that Gertie and Noodles and he were in the ditch.

'We're in the ditch,' he said.

'I know,' said Noodles.

'I'm awfully sorry,' said Snubs.

'I prefer it,' said Noodles. 'I feel far safer here. May we stay till it's over?'

From the general look of things it seemed to Snubs that Gertie, at any rate, would stay considerably longer than that. On the other hand, if she were ever going to get out under her own power, it was better to make the attempt at once — before the ground became even softer than it was at present.

'Wait a second,' he said. And he trod on the starter.

Nothing happened.

'Dash!' he observed. 'I'll have to hop out and swing her.'

'Oh, don't get out, Snubs! I know you'll be struck.'

'Rot,' said Snubs; and clambered out with some difficulty; and swung the starting-handle. And went on swinging it. And stopped suddenly — not because the engine had shown the slightest response to his efforts, but because it had just occurred to him that the track of the front wheels was in a very unusual condition.

He bent lower. He felt among the grass and the mud and the grease and the stinging-nettles. He came out again holding one end of the steering-rod to which the foreman at his London garage had taken such a profound and, as it now seemed, justifiable dislike.

'What is it, Snubs? What's the matter? What are you smiling at?'

Had he smiled? Well, it was something to know, or at any rate to hope, that it was Gertie and not her owner who had sent them off the road like that. But he doubted, somehow, if Noodles would appreciate this rather academic distinction, and in any case it had very little bearing on the next step.

'I wasn't smiling,' he said, moving out of the glare of the headlights. 'I'm awfully sorry, Noodles, but I'm afraid we're stuck.'

'Oh?' said Noodles. 'Well, come inside, then. You'll get simply soaked out there.'

'I think it's stopping,' said Snubs, putting out a rather superfluous hand.

Rumble. Boom.

'Snubs! Come inside at once!'

'No, honestly ——'

'Well, take your coat, then.'

The coat sailed out and hit him, and he flung it back.

'You keep that on,' he said menacingly. 'Do you think I want you to catch cold?'

'I'll put it on again if you come inside.'

Snubs looked up and down the road. But nothing had come along yet, and it seemed very unlikely that anything would come along, for as far as he could judge they were miles from any main route.

'Will you?' he asked, less threateningly.

'Yes, I swear I will. Only do be quick!'

So Snubs climbed in again, and again put the coat over Noodles's back. And as there was no point in wasting the batteries, he switched off the lights.

'I suppose you're rather sick with me,' he suggested.

'Oh, no. I was, but I know you didn't mean to be unkind. And I don't care in the least how long we stay here. As long as the lightning doesn't start again. I'm perfectly happy.'

Snubs tried to look at her, though there wasn't a trace of irony in her voice.

'Are you?' he said. 'Well, I don't know that I am.'

'You mean about your poor car?'

'No,' said Snubs. 'I mean, about you.'

She seemed to be thinking this over, and he rather wished he hadn't said it.

'About me? Oh, you mustn't worry about me. I — I was rather absurd.'

'No, you weren't.'

'And anyhow, now we're going to spend the night here ——'

'But we're not,' said Snubs. 'My dear Noodles, we can't possibly do that. Something's bound to come along, sooner or later, and ——'

'Oh, do you think so?'

'Well, even if it doesn't, we can't stop here. We must walk to the nearest village. When the rain stops, I mean.'

'I'm awfully sorry,' said Noodles, 'but I don't think I can. You see, I've hurt my heel.'

'What!'

The pale beam from the dash-lamp suddenly shone down into the cockpit, and Snubs was trying to get on his knees.

'Do you mean just now?' he snapped. 'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Oh, no,' said Noodles, twisting her legs away. 'I did it this afternoon — with my shoe, I mean. It sort of rubbed it.'

'Oh,' said Snubs, sitting up again and turning off the light. 'But you could come a little way, couldn't you?'

'But, Snubs, can't we ——'

'That's impossible. I can't tell everybody that we sat all night in a ditch.'

'Why can't you? And why've you got to?'

Snubs ground his teeth.

'Well, good-night,' said Noodles. 'I'm going to sleep.'

Snubs clenched his fists.

'Don't you understand ——' he began, forcibly. And that was just as far as he got. Because if Noodles didn't understand, then no one but a cad would tell her. Equally, no one but a cad would give way and spend the rest of the night here. And, similarly, no one but a cad would leave her alone by the roadside. The chances of not being a cad in these difficult circumstances seemed about a million to one. Philosophy was strained almost to the breaking-point, and even if

the main anchor still held, one of the lesser cables had just snapped. For three years he had been loyal to Gertie in spite of everything, but this was the end. This time she had gone too far. The long thraldom was over. He definitely hated her.

'If it wasn't for this confounded car,' he started again; 'if it wasn't for this ghastly old bundle of broken-down scrap-iron that never goes two yards without doing something stupid; if it wasn't for this hideous old horror that's gone and landed us here; if it wasn't . . .'

Words seemed to fail him, and he began kicking Gertie from where he sat. Later he discovered that she had retaliated by scraping a large slice of leather off the top of his right shoe, but for the moment his ungallant behaviour brought enormous relief.

'Take that!' he growled. 'And that. And that.'

'Oh, Snubs!'

'What?'

'Oh, please don't mind so much. It was all my fault, really.'

'No, it wasn't!'

'It was, Snubs. You wouldn't be here except for me.'

This was true, but Snubs denied it with equal fervour.

'Yes, I should,' he said. 'You're not to talk like that, Noodles. It was all my idea to come chasing after you, really, and I ought to have had the sense —— Hi! What's the matter?'

For she had caught his arm again.

'Oh, Snubs — don't you want me, either?'

And again he tingled.

'What? Of course I do, Noodles. I mean ——

Well, I don't know what I mean, but — look here — well, you don't understand, but ——'

This wasn't going to do, either, and he checked himself by the old expedient of coughing.

'Oh, Snubs! Now you've caught cold, and it's all my fault.'

'I haven't. It isn't. Nothing's your fault. Only if you hold my arm like that ——'

'Oh, I'm sorry.'

She let go, and he wished she hadn't.

'Noodles!'

No answer.

'Noodles — listen.'

'What? Oh, I'm so tired. Oh, what is going to happen to me?'

'Nothing!' shouted Snubs, for it would be the last straw if she started crying on top of everything else. 'It's all going to be all right — if only you'll listen to me. But you've got to do what I say. You've got to get out and try to walk a little way. Look — it's quite stopped raining. And there's the moon.'

There, as he said, was the moon — apparently racing through a rent in the remains of the big, dark cloud. For an instant it showed them each other's faces, and they both looked away as if they had seen something that surprised and terrified them. The same startling mixture of youth and age; of innocence and experience; of piercing interest and impenetrable mystery. Something had happened, or was just going to happen, but they couldn't tell whether they were friends or enemies — only that there was danger in either case. The moonlight faded, and they trembled in the blackness.

'I say — Noodles.'

'It's all right, Snubs. I — I'm trying to open the door.'

'Let me.'

He leant across her, and the danger seemed so near that every muscle was braced to meet it. But the catch gave, and the crisis had passed.

'Wait a second,' said Snubs. 'I'll bring the suitcase, because — well, you may need it.'

He started marching down the faintly glistening road.

'Snubs! Wait! I'd forgotten my heel.'

He turned round, and ran back.

'Hang on to my arm,' he said.

'You — you don't mind?'

'Do what I tell you!'

She did what he told her. At first she seemed far lighter than the suitcase, but with every yard she became more difficult to steer and support.

'Like a rest?' he suggested.

'If you don't mind.'

But as she still clung to him, he felt bound to cut the rest as short as possible.

'Ready? Come on, then.'

'Where — where are we going, Snubs?'

'We're going to find a house.'

'Are we?'

Well, he hoped so. But the dim perspective of trees and hedges seemed to stretch on for ever, and the rests became more and more frequent.

'It seems an awful shame,' said Noodles, once, 'that you should be punished for my silliness.'

'Don't talk tripe,' said her escort. And on they went.

'I'm not being punished,' he added.

'Aren't you? I think you're an angel, Snubs.'

'Well, I'm not,' he replied. 'How's the heel?'

'It's all right if you don't ask about it.'

'Oh. Sorry.'

'Oh, Snubs, I didn't mean that. I only meant —— Oh, Snubs, do you think we'll ever have any fun again?'

'Oh, Lord, yes. Lots.'

'Do you really? I mean, can you possibly go on liking me?'

'Oh, shut up.'

'Snubs!'

'Now, look here ——'

Oh, gosh, there was the moonlight again, and this time she looked about seven years old. He slammed the suitcase down on the road.

'Sit there,' he said. 'I'm going on by myself. If I can't see anything from the top of this hill ——'

'But what have I done?'

'Nothing. But I can't ——'

'Oh, listen! What's that?'

They both stood still and listened. A faint, nasal music, which not even the summer night could disguise as the horns of elfland, came drifting towards them from the darkness ahead.

'A gramophone!' cried Snubs. 'Come on! It's the last lap.'

He seized up the suitcase, he caught hold of Noodles's arm, and he hurried forward. The top of the hill was nearer than he had thought, and there — just beyond it — was a pitch-black cube, with a light in one of its windows, and an almost invisible sign creaking from an iron bracket over the door. Snubs ran under it and hammered with his fists.

'It's a pub,' he said, over his shoulder. 'Perhaps they'll have a car we can hire.'

But the Fox and Hounds, a little, isolated halfway house that catered for a few scattered agriculturalists, and represented such a continuous loss to the brewery company which owned it that they would have abandoned it years ago but for the fixed policy which says, 'Never surrender a licence'; the Fox and Hounds, we say, merely shook its middle-aged female head at this suggestion of a car.

Well, a horse and trap, then? Or a couple of bicycles?

It shook its head again.

How far was the nearest village?

A matter of four miles to Inaudible, and of three and a bit over to Unintelligible.

It hadn't got a telephone, Snubs supposed.

No, that it hadn't.

Well, was there a garage anywhere near?

What was that?

A garridge.

No, sir. But Mr. Indistinguishable at the sawmills might have some petrol to spare, if that was what the gentlemen wanted. About a mile away, that would be; over towards Incomprehensible.

'Noodles!'

'Yes?'

'It's no good. You'll have to wait here.'

'I don't mind.'

A mystic smile passed between her and the Fox and Hounds, yet they completely misunderstood each other. For Noodles's smile simply meant: 'You look rather kind, and your house looks rather cosy'; but the landlady's smile . . .

'Well, sir,' she said, leaning forward over the threshold, 'if you'd like a nice room, I could easy clear my nephew's things out of it. They're away, you see, and I don't see how you're going to get on to-night. You'd be on a holiday, I reckon? There! Isn't that a shame! But I'd only charge you three-and-six, and if your lady'd fancy a nice cup of tea ——'

'What? Oh, thanks awfully, I mean. But she won't —— I mean, I've got to go back to the car. But she —— No, it's all right, Noodles; leave it to me. I'll come back in the morning.'

'But wouldn't she have another ——'

'No. You're not to ask her. Do you hear me?'

'But you can't possibly ——'

'Yes, I can. Shut up.'

'But where are you going to ——'

'I'll be all right, I tell you. Here, let me have my coat. And I'll give you the suitcase. You'll find Beaky's pyjamas in it, and some other things. You'll be all right; only don't try and explain anything. I'll be along in the morning. Do you understand?'

'No, I don't. Why can't you ——'

'Oh, please, Noodles. Can't you see she's staring at us? Look — here's some money, in case you want it. No, take it, or I swear I'll fling it on the road. There! Good-night, and for Heaven's sake, don't answer any questions. And for Heaven's sake, don't start till I come for you.'

'Oh, of course not, Snubs. But ——'

'There. Now I'm off.'

He'd gone. He'd left her. She could hear his footsteps scampering away in the night.

'Snubs!' she screamed.

There was no answer. She looked round, and it was

true that the landlady was staring at her. She stared back.

'Don't you mind, dear,' said the landlady. 'Lots of gentlemen get sharp like that when they're worried about their cars. Don't you pay any attention, I say, and he'll be back soon enough, and I'll be there to let him in. Now, just you wait down here while I get the room a little straight, and . . .'

She bustled away with the suitcase, leaving Noodles gazing at the flame of an oil-lamp — her eyes growing larger, and heavier, and sleepier every moment.

'Poor Snubs,' she thought. 'He's been awfully noble to-night, and I've done nothing but make it more difficult. And he's really been perfectly marvellous, but he seems to hate anyone thanking him. And he'll always dislike me after this, I expect, and I like him better than anyone in the world. But I don't see why he couldn't have asked if there was another bedroom, because I mean to say it was almost too noble to be as noble as all that.'

She yawned, and sank on to a hard chair.

'Almost too noble,' she repeated musingly. 'But I adore him for it — even though he was a bit cross — because he did really treat me as if I was quite absolutely grown-up.'

She went on staring at the lamp.

'I wonder,' she murmured presently, 'if he thinks I am.'

Having blown the remnants of the big, dark cloud far out to sea, the wind dropped, and the moon shone down on a pale landscape where Nature herself seemed to be sleeping in utter calm and peace after the violent scenes which she had been through. And Noodles

slept also — the sleep of complete exhaustion. And the landlady slept — steadily, too, though under self-imposed orders to wake instantly when the young gentleman should return. But the young gentleman wasn't thinking of returning, for he was wrapt in slumber as well. It must have been galling for Gertie, after all that she had planned and achieved, to find herself being treated no longer as an individual, or even as a motor; but as a mere armchair or sofa on which her honourable owner was relaxing his weary limbs.

Thus Snubs Tipton remained motionless and unconscious in the ditch, until the moon sank and the sun rose, and the first of the milk-lorries — which rest not even on Whit-Sunday — came rattling and roaring towards him.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Beaky at the Majestic — Breakfast with the Adored One — Humiliation of Gertie — Startling discovery in a suitcase — Pippingfold again — An interesting engagement — Significant expression on Snubs Tipton's face — The end

I

THERE being, it would seem, no limit to the power exercised by Mrs. Shirley over the Majestic Hotel, it was in the Majestic Hotel that Beaky reopened his eyes, groaned, sneezed, and generally speaking came to himself. Doubtless, if Mrs. Shirley had so willed it, he would have found himself in a room overlooking the sea, or even in the bridal suite; but it had been sufficient for her purpose in this immediate emergency that he should be admitted to a bedroom at all, and the management — as represented by crimped hair and striped trousers — had produced from up its obliging sleeve a small apartment at the back of the fourth floor. An apartment which gave on to the glass roof of the hotel garage, and on to the tall chimney of the Newcliff Steam Laundry, and on to red and grey roofs climbing slowly towards the skyline. An apartment furnished in the very earliest Majestic style, and smelling faintly of linoleum and soot. Yet an interesting apartment in that Mrs. Shirley's ascendancy had apparently conjured it into existence out of absolutely nothing at all.

'Well, madam,' crimped hair and striped trousers had said, 'of course we're crowded right out. In fact, I've been turning visitors away all afternoon, and there isn't literally an empty corner. Still, madam, I'll see what I can do.'

At these words Number 437 must have materialized out of the ether, and so completely and realistically that it had even remembered to provide a key in the reception-bureau. Beaky was carried into the lift, and elevated, and extracted, and taken along the corridor, and by the time all this had been done, there — most magically and mysteriously — was Number 437 waiting to receive him. The key fitted the door; he was borne in, and lowered carefully on to the bed.

Trust Mrs. Shirley to have accumulated a doctor, and trust Sylvia — though she had hardly spoken to him — to have made it the doctor's one wish and aim in life to allay her anxiety and calm her fears. 'Nothing broken,' he said. 'Very slight concussion, possibly. Possibly not even that. Keep him quiet till the morning, and he'll be as fit as a fiddle. The pulse is splendid.'

This was a lie, or, if you prefer it, a professional euphemism; but more than justified by the look in Sylvia's eyes.

'Is it really?' she said. 'And may I — may I go in and see him?'

Here she made the mistake of glancing at her mother, and Mrs. Shirley shook her head.

'No, darling,' she said. 'Better not.'

And she glanced at the doctor, and the doctor thought what a very attractive woman she was, and instantly took her side — though she had actually interrupted him as he was on the point of saying that nothing could do the patient more good.

'Well, well,' he said, instead. 'Perhaps he'd better keep quite quiet. Shock, you know. Nothing serious, but . . .'

It was a little difficult to keep one's head in such

captivating company. Medically speaking, he had been astonished by the patient's rapid recovery, though it would be foolish to dismiss the case too hurriedly when there was every chance that he could convincingly pay at least two more visits. But as a human being — and who could fail to be a human being with these delightful people? — all he really wanted was to agree with them both, and to tell them whatever they wanted to hear. He blinked from one to the other, all eagerness to contradict himself at the first hint that this was what they would like. But Sylvia was looking away, and her mother seemed quite satisfied with the diagnosis as it stood.

'It's very good of you,' she said. 'I hope we didn't interrupt your dinner? Sylvia — the doctor's just going.'

The doctor's face fell, and rose again — if that be the correct antithesis — as the younger of the two charmers smiled and held out her hand.

'Thank you most awfully,' she was saying. 'You — you don't know how ——'

'Just a moment, darling,' said Mrs. Shirley. And she walked away with the doctor, and he was so maddened by her fascination that he tried to laugh at the idea of payment — but without the slightest effect, for which he was glad when he came to his senses. And he said that he would send in a little something to help the patient to sleep, and that he'd come back first thing in the morning, but that Mrs. Shirley mustn't hesitate to ring him up if she felt the least wish to do so, and if he might say so what a charming girl she had. Quite charming. 'And your son-in-law ——'

'What!' cried Mrs. Shirley. And bit her lip. And began to laugh.

And the doctor laughed, too — as insanely as if he had been listening to an encore played by a string quartette. And he wrung Mrs. Shirley's hand quite painfully, and cackled again, and scampered away in the most unprofessional manner imaginable — turning at the head of the stairs to wave encouragingly, and nearly falling headlong down them as this really most bewitching woman waved back at him.

'What a delightful family,' he said to himself, and only wished that they could all have slight concussion every day in the week; so long as they had it when he happened to be looking out of his surgery window, as he had so fortunately been doing when that curious accident had taken place. Thus he beamed and chuckled, and hurried off to the chemist round the corner.

'But, Mummie darling,' said Sylvia, 'why not?'

'Darling — because I'd rather you didn't.'

'I see. At least, I don't really, but ——'

'To-morrow,' said Mrs. Shirley, 'you shall talk to him as much as you like. But just for this evening — well, I'd have to be there too, you see. And ——'

'Oh. Was that what you were going to say when you started?'

'No. I don't know what I was going to say.'

'I see, darling. You — you don't think he'll get up and run away, though — do you?'

'I don't.'

'Nor do I,' said Sylvia, looking so adorable that our pen trembles as we describe it; that it is all that we can do not to lose our head like the doctor, and come bursting into the story and paying her the most outrageous compliments to her face.

'Besides,' said Mrs. Shirley, with an enchanting

twinkle of her own, 'he can't get out till I say so. You see, I've locked him in.'

This, most decidedly, was anything but what she had meant to say when she started, but it cleared the air far more satisfactorily than any of the things which she had meant to say. For Sylvia laughed. And Mrs. Shirley laughed, too. And they were laughing at themselves, and at each other, and at Mr. R. H. Brett, and they couldn't stop even though the thunder came and rolled outside — which, as everyone knows, has a tendency to make one rather solemn. And everything was going to be all right, but it was so much more exciting and amusing to have a last evening together like this than to have missed it by hurrying things, or to have spoilt it by discussing them. Beaky's name was not mentioned again, but the light which danced in Sylvia's eyes was continually reflected in her mother's.

'That was far better than the pierrots could possibly have been,' said Sylvia to herself, as she smiled at the face in her bedroom looking-glass. 'And I'd have hated to be in a tin place like that while the storm was going on.'

The smile suddenly faded.

'Oh, I can't wait, I can't wait!' she cried. 'And what if I'm absolutely wrong?'

The smile returned, mockingly.

'You've got to wait,' it said. 'And do you imagine for one instant that you're wrong?'

'Well, no,' said Sylvia, with the frankness for which her character had always been distinguished. And she jumped into bed, and sang herself to sleep.

2

So Beaky had no more visitors that night except a

page-boy who startled him by entering with a pass-key and some pyjamas (Did you know that big hotels can always provide these? Well, Mrs. Shirley did!) — and a toothbrush and a glass of water and a pill.

'Mrs. Shirley's compliments, sir,' he piped, 'and will you please swallow this? And the lady said would you please wait for the doctor before you get up, sir?'

The errand and message seemed so much part of this experienced cherub's everyday work, and his entrance had been so abrupt and unexpected that he had gone again before Mr. Brett could do more than stare at him. And though the door was no longer jammed, as it had apparently been when he had tested it before, it was getting a bit late to go wandering in search of his benefactress. Besides, she had told him to stay where he was, and so had the doctor, and so did the shaky feeling in his preposterous legs, which was partly physical and partly emotional; and anyhow he'd got to think what he was going to say to Sylvia before he left this strange sanctuary and very likely made a worse mess of everything than he had made already.

Meanwhile, shame and gratitude would have made him swallow something far more nauseating than that enigmatical pill, if by doing so he could oblige any member of the Shirley family; and he swallowed it, and drank the water, and brushed his teeth with the tooth-brush, and donned the pyjamas, and returned to the bed to do some really solid thinking, and in five minutes was as sound asleep as he had ever been in his life. Towards morning his soul began motoring in a wild and complicated manner, and had clothed his astral body in astral pyjamas which made it particularly embarrassing that he should be en route for some-body's wedding. Again and again he stopped, and

bought or borrowed or even stole more suitable garments, and put them on and started motoring again — only to discover that he was still in the astral pyjamas and that the church was as far away as ever. And sometimes the motor was very small, so that he had to propel it as though it were a velocipede; and sometimes it was enormously large and powerful, and swept up hills and over dizzy viaducts and crumbling precipices, and shot him out, and ran away, and then came back and laughed at him and said that they were all waiting for him, and that if he wasn't quick someone else would have to be the bridegroom. So then he knew that it was his own wedding, and the chase became more desperate and sluggish than ever. 'But she never answered my letter,' he kept saying. 'Oh, yes, she did,' they answered in the form of various mis-shapen pedestrians and pierrots and men in panamas; 'but she refused you, so you've got to marry Miss Mulberry. This way, now. There she is.' And they all rushed after him, and he had to escape from them with the added handicap of a spare wheel which he was unable to detach from his own leg. 'Sylvia!' he shouted. 'Sylvia — help!' And there she was, looking so reproachful that it was more than he could bear, and they were in the little room at Dolphin Street, and she was telling him that he'd got to give her back her photograph. And at this dreadful news he became dissolved in such a welter of self-pity and misery and remorse and bitter, unavailing regret that he could only choke and sob and fumble blindly for her hand. And the hand gripped his, and slid up to his wrist, and became larger and larger and more and more vice-like, and he tried to scream without the faintest result, and he knew that if he didn't scream it was the end of

everything, and he made a supreme effort, and screamed deafeningly with his astral lungs but only just audibly with his real ones.

And he was in a strange bed in a strange room, with the sun shining in on his face and making him blink, and with a strange man sitting beside him and feeling his pulse.

'Oh!' he said 'Was I asleep?'

'Splendid,' said the doctor. 'Just try moving the head.'

Beaky moved the head.

'Feel anything?' asked the doctor.

Only an indescribable sense of relief.

'No,' said Beaky. 'I'm all right. Thank you.'

'Like to get up?'

'Well, of course. What's the time?'

'Past nine,' said the doctor. 'Let me see you walk across the room.'

The preposterous legs shot out of the bed, and afforded the doctor this simple pleasure.

'You're all right,' he said. 'Better not do it again, though. You mightn't be quite so lucky.'

'What? Oh, I see what you mean. Oh, rather not.'

'Right,' said the doctor. 'Well, I'll just go down and tell your good lady not to worry any more, and then I must run. Good-bye. Good luck.'

'What?' said Beaky again. 'Oh, I say — don't I ——'

'No, no. That's all settled.'

A brisk nod, a brisk smile, and he had gone. Good lady? What a rum way to speak of Mrs. Shirley. Not that she wasn't good. It was infernally and devastatingly good of her to have paid the doctor like that, and to have put him up like this, and the cheque which she

should have at the first possible moment would never clear off the debt. But —— Hullo! Where were his clothes?

A knock on the door.

'Come in!'

Here were his clothes.

'I've got that oil out nicely, sir.'

'Oh, have you? Oh, thanks awfully. Thanks.'

'Thank you, sir. Nice morning, sir. That bit of a storm seems to have cleared the air.'

'What? Oh, rather.'

Beaky dressed in a dream, and slunk hurriedly down to the barber's shop in the basement, and was shaved, and bought a clean handkerchief, and felt remarkably peckish, but had still got enough cash to pay for his own breakfast — only ought he to try and find Mrs. Shirley first, and start thanking her for ——

'Hullo, Beaky!'

His knees knocked together, and something whirled violently round inside his chest.

'Hullo, Sylvia.'

'You've recovered, I hear.'

'Oh, rather. That's to say, it was nothing. I mean, I feel the most awful sort of —— I mean, you must have thought me the most ——'

A severe attack of aphasia brought these observations to a muffled end. If only one could manage to look at her when one was speaking, or to speak when one was looking at her.

'Mummie's having breakfast in bed,' said Sylvia. 'Have you had any yet?'

'Well, no. No. Not yet, I mean.'

'We'd better have it together, then.'

'What? Oh, rather. I mean, oh, yes.'

He stumbled after her. He tried to stumble past her and open the dining-room door, only a waiter anticipated him and it looked, so he imagined, as if he were trying to get in first. The waiter was surprised to receive a savage scowl, and again Beaky stumbled in the adored one's wake.

'This is our table. Will you order what you like?'

'Oh, rather. But I mean ——'

Added to the difficulty of expressing himself on any subject, and the difficulty of explaining — without its really having been mentioned — that of course he was going to pay for his own breakfast, and the difficulty of discovering that he was no longer in the least peckish, and the transcendent difficulty of knowing whether or not to refer to his letter, he was overwhelmed by the realization that this was the first time that he had ever seen Sylvia so early in the morning, and that she was far more exquisite and wonderful in this intimate atmosphere than he had ever known her before. And the little faces she was making at that typewritten menu-card. Oh, gosh, what luck he was in, and what a fool he was not to know what to do with it!

'Er ——'

'But, Beaky, what ——'

''Begyourpardon?'

'—— what were you doing?'

'Doing? Oh — yesterday, you mean?'

'Yes. When I saw you. Why did those other people drive off like that?'

'What other —— Oh, didn't you see? That was Snubs and Noodles.'

'Noodles? But why —— What were you all doing? And why didn't they wait? Didn't they *see* you'd fallen out?'

'I don't know,' said Beaky.

'But I don't understand. I thought . . .'

Here Sylvia's quick faces flickered more rapidly than ever, for it suddenly seemed that perhaps Beaky hadn't come to Newcliff to look for her, after all. And what had Noodles been doing there, when the school had said that she'd gone away? And how did Mr. Tipton come into it? And why should these last two characters have deserted the first with such extraordinary precipitance?

'I don't understand,' she repeated. 'Beaky — what on earth were you all doing?' And though this was certainly the most important question, she couldn't help asking a second one. 'And where did the others go to?'

'I don't know,' said Beaky. 'We hadn't settled.'

'Hadn't settled what?'

'Well, you see, it all happened so quickly. And I don't think they *did* notice me. And I'd no idea you were here.'

'Oh.'

'And Gertie was making such a row that ——'

'Gertie? Who's Gertie?'

'Snubs's car, I mean. He calls her that.'

'Oh, I see. Only I don't. Had you just come down for a drive, then?'

'No, no. I'm telling you, Sylvia. We'd lost Noodles.'

'But you said ——'

'I know. We'd just found her. You see . . .'

Most distinctly he didn't want to talk about Noodles, or to expose the disgrace which she had brought on the family name. But if Sylvia asked him — and particularly if she looked at him like that — then he supposed she'd got to be told.

'It's — it's rather a long story,' he said.

'I'm listening,' said Sylvia.

'Well ——' said Beaky, and he started relating it. Not for a moment during the long narrative did he forget that he still didn't know whether Sylvia had received his letter or not, and that this was the only point that really mattered. And at each little gasp of interest which she gave, he looked piercingly across the table at her, as though it were just possible that she might be going to help him to change the subject. But she never did. He brought the history right down to the episode of his sister's sudden reappearance, and was just beginning to fumble with the next incident — because neither he nor Noodles was going to get much credit out of it — when Sylvia interrupted him.

'But did she want to come away?' she asked. 'I mean, I think she'd been awfully sporting — though of course I should have loathed it — but if she really wanted to stay with those people ——'

'Oh, she didn't, said Beaky, leaping right over the discreditable incident. 'She was hating it, too.'

'Poor Noodles.'

'What? Oh, rather. And then I saw you, you see. And I — I mean ——'

'Yes, I know what you did then. But where do you suppose they went?'

'Who? Snubs and Noodles? Oh, back to Pippingfold, I should think.'

'But oughtn't you to ring up and find out?'

'There's no telephone there.'

'Oh,' said Sylvia. 'Well, oughtn't you to go there, then?'

Beaky's countenance became a battleground between obstinacy and conscience. How could he possi-

bly go off to Pippingfold without asking Sylvia that question? How could he possibly ask it if all she did was to try and hustle him away? How could he bring out the attractive qualities of his own nature, if he refused to champion his young and only sister? Poor Noodles? Oh, certainly and by all means; but she'd have had a night there by now, and even Mr. Cottenham couldn't go on kicking up a row for ever. Besides, Snubs ——

At this point conscience, and Sylvia's clear eyes, suddenly scored a notable victory.

'I suppose I ought,' he said. 'Yes, of course. I'll have to see about a train. Only . . .'

He looked at her in an agony of longing and curiosity.

'What's the matter?' she asked.

'I was wondering — I mean, I suppose you didn't —— I mean, did you ——'

'What?'

'Well, when did you come down here?'

Sylvia looked more puzzled than ever.

'On Friday,' she said. 'After lunch.'

'Straight from London?'

'Yes. Why?'

He'd posted the letter on Thursday evening. She must have got it, then. Surely it couldn't have made so little impression on her that she had forgotten about it already. Or was there an answer waiting for him at Wykeham Street — a refusal, of course — and was she just trying to save him from making a hopeless, blundering ass of himself? Was she being angelically kind, and angelically tactful?

That was it. A black mist descended over everything.

'It doesn't matter,' he mumbled. 'I don't want any more food. I'd better go.'

'But, Beaky ——'

'What?'

'Aren't you going to see Mummie? She'll be down in a minute, I know, and —— Beaky, are you angry about something? Beaky?'

'No, of course not. You're quite right, I expect.'

'What are you talking about?'

He couldn't help hoping, even then. He looked at her. The spark vanished. For the ten millionth and final time he had been a presumptuous fool, and if he said anything more he would be an unpardonable fool as well. When he was an old man he supposed that he would remember how he had once had breakfast alone with her, and when he was dead perhaps someone would be kind enough to put her photograph in his coffin. But how he was going to get through the next hour, or day, or month, or year, or half-century ——

'Oh, there she is. Mummie! Beaky's just going.'

Mr. Brett pulled himself partially together. Shook Mrs. Shirley's hand. Began muttering incoherent thanks, and trying to explain something about a cheque when he got back to his rooms. Also something about a time-table.

'But where?' said Mrs. Shirley. 'And is there any hurry?'

'He's going to Pippingfold, Mummie. You see ——'

'To Pippingfold? But why not with us, then? Sylvia, darling, what were you thinking of? You know I promised to go back this morning, and we can start any time that suits Mr. Brett. Now, if he likes.'

Her all-seeing eye approved this improvisation,

noting as it did those two glances which were trying so hard not to look pleased.

'We can picnic there,' she added; 'unless Mr. Brett has promised to lunch with his guardian.'

'Oh, no,' said Beaky. 'But . . .'

He looked at Sylvia, and Sylvia looked at her mother, and her mother looked penetratingly at young Mr. Brett. Had he really thought that he could propose across a breakfast-table, and in an hotel dining-room? How pitiful, and touching, and absurd! Well, he should have his chance later on. He was entitled to that, and so was Sylvia. 'And so am I,' added Mrs. Shirley, to herself, 'because this is far more exhausting for me than it is for either of them. It'll be a long time before they find that out, but it's the mothers that really go through it. What a queer business it all is. And darling Sylvia, how sweet she looks in that little necklace.'

She touched Beaky on the arm.

'Would you be very kind,' she asked, 'and tell the porter I'd like my car round in twenty minutes? That'll do for you, won't it?'

Beaky had forgotten all about his old age and his coffin.

'Oh, rather,' he said; and raced away. Hope had returned. Lots of people were refused the first time. He'd been mad to write, but he'd be madder still to lose a chance like this. He'd make a fresh start. He'd get Sylvia alone somewhere. He'd keep his head, somehow, and he'd jolly well have it out. Yes, that was what he told himself, with a confidence which we may find it a little difficult to share, was what he would jolly well do.

Mrs. Shirley was talking to the head waiter about

sandwiches and thermos-flasks. Sylvia was staring out of the big plate-glass windows, and looking a little anxious and unhappy.

Poor Sylvia!

3

No question that the right treatment for Gertie was a dose of that indignity which she had so often, and at last so extravagantly, inflicted on her owner. For three years she had rewarded his constant devotion and support with constant misbehaviour. Now he had kicked her, and worse was still to come.

For no breakdown lorry disturbed its Sabbath rest to lug her from her self-chosen ditch. She was hauled out backwards by the noisiest, cheapest and altogether most disreputable of milk-vans. She was prodded and still further kicked by the agricultural labourers who drove it. 'Never mind,' she said, trying and hopelessly failing to look better-bred than these unworthy assailants; 'they've still got to get me to a garage, and I don't see them doing that without any tackle. I'm not afraid of them!'

But they weren't afraid of her, and they hadn't the faintest intention of getting her to a garage. They had wire, they had her own jack-handle, they had strong arms and souls trained to subdue every mechanical appliance by the same ruthless methods with which their ancestors had mastered the brute creation. They were not held back by any sentiment on the part of the young gentleman who had hailed them from that leafy bower; for he had merely laughed when the first attempt at extraction had carried away the spare wheel and its bracket, and again when the second and successful attempt had ended by her colliding with the

tail-board of the milk-van and receiving an enormous dent in the lid of her dickey.

A most encouraging young gentleman for whom to delay that cargo of cans. A most enthusiastic and helpful young gentleman when he understood their agricultural idea of lashing the two ends of the broken steering-rod to the jack-handle, and thus — if only it held — achieving in a few minutes what would have taken a professional surgeon as many days. Imagine Gertie's feelings when she found this impertinent plan being put into operation; when the alignment of her front wheels was adjusted by a series of frightful whacks from the agricultural boots; and when her owner — no longer her slave as well — laughed yet again as one of these dreadful bumpkins fastened off the tourniquet with his own fingers, and rising from this outrage managed to drive his elbow through the glass of the offside headlamp.

Her spirit was definitely broken. If Snubs could stand by while she was subjected to treatment like this, if he could speak of her as he did speak and had spoken, then she had reached the end. There are wives, we understand — though not in this chronicle — who have been tamed like this after years of ill-tempered tyranny; who have found suddenly that they have created the armour against their own poisoned shafts, and have turned round and spent the rest of their lives eating out of their lord and master's hand. Gertie's connection with Snubs Tipton was perhaps scarcely as honourable or as hallowed as this; but the effect was precisely the same. Her blank rage merely served to dry up the water which last night had short-circuited two of the sparking-plugs. At the first touch of the starter she sprang into obedient life, and

though she had never ticked over either noiselessly or regularly — such precision being beyond the aim of her original designer — there was yet an attempt at these qualities which showed how thoroughly she had been cowed.

But repentance is one thing, and forgiveness is another.

'Come on, you old brute,' said Snubs, as she trembled beneath him. 'Now let's see if you've got the sense to move.'

She moved — trying, you would say, to look back at him for a crumb of praise as she did so. The agriculturalists reported that there was what they described as a fair wobble from the front wheels, and Snubs's wrists were inclined to agree with them; but the bandage on the steering-rod still held.

A slight pause, then, for mutual congratulations and for gratitude in the shape of both words and coins of baser metal. The general view held by all three is that Gertie will probably hang together if she maintains a moderate pace, and picks her way carefully. A rash view before her recent change of heart, but she hears it now without even base-firing. A few more words about milk, weather and public holidays, and the party breaks up. The van goes swinging and rattling and clattering towards Newcliff. Gertie wobbles soberly towards the Fox and Hounds. Reaches it. And stops.

There is no point in disturbing Noodles at this early hour, just as there can be no real point in arriving at Pippingfold before breakfast. On a Sunday morning and in the absence of a telephone, it is clear that Mr. Cottenham cannot be expecting them, and there is everything to be said, now, for waiting until he and

they have fed. Even longer, perhaps, if the next crisis is to be dealt with in the least unfavourable conditions. Snubs puts in a good deal of thinking on this subject, planning and rehearsing quite a number of imaginary speeches; but whether any of them will be used or not seems rather uncertain. For one thing, it is quite likely that Mr. Cottenham will refuse to listen to them. For another, that Noodles will prefer to arrive alone.

'I'll have to have a good talk with her,' he decides. 'She's bound to make a mess of it, if she's left to herself. She's bound to tell him far more than she need. She's so infernally straightforward.'

The thought of Noodles's straightforwardness makes him sigh and frown, and then smile. But here is the landlady again, so good-morning to her, and good-morning to the young gentleman, and it's a beautiful day after all that rain last night, isn't it? The landlady's natural curiosity as to how and where the young gentleman has spent the night is skilfully baffled by some very sympathetic red herrings about the price of beer and other subjects of professional interest. If it is aroused again by a strange request that she, and not the young gentleman, shall go upstairs and get hold of the suitcase, then it is again quelled by the flattering and confidential manner in which the request is made. 'I'd be afraid of waking her,' he explains, with the utmost accuracy, and the landlady comes back — with the suitcase — and reports that Noodles is sleeping like an angel.

So Snubs overcomes another problem by driving out of sight, with the vague intimation that he won't be long, and shaves with the help of the driving-mirror and hot water from the radiator, and changes

his collar, and brushes his hair, and returns to discuss the matter of breakfast.

No difficulty about that. By half-past eight he has finished it, and wanders out again to smoke a pipe of Baffy's Mixture. Then he waits, and waits, and goes on waiting, but it isn't until nearly ten — when he is beginning to get a little anxious — that Noodles suddenly appears on the scene, and tells him that she has never had such a perfect night in her life. But poor Snubs, was it quite awful out there in —— A scream of delighted surprise.

'Oh, Snubs! Did you manage to get it out again? Oh, you are clever!'

The tingling sensation.

'Did you do it all yourself?'

Well, no. Some awfully decent fellows helped. 'But we can go on, Noodles — as soon as you've eaten something.'

'Oh, yes. Of course.'

'I'll just see about it.'

'Oh, thank you. I suppose we've got to go on?'

But Snubs was talking to his friend the landlady, and Noodles didn't repeat her question. Of course they'd got to go on. They couldn't have accidents and adventures for ever.

'How's the heel, Noodles?'

'Oh, much better. Thank you.'

'Beaky's pyjamas quite comfortable?'

'Delicious. Oh, I say!'

'What?'

'Nothing. At least . . .'

'What is it? More trouble?'

'No, not exactly. But a most extraordinary thing. Frightfully exciting, I mean. Only perhaps I oughtn't . . . Or do you know about it? Has he told you?'

'Has who told me what?'

'Beaky. I say, Snubs, it's most terribly thrilling — if it isn't a joke, I mean. And of course I think she's far the nicest girl in the world.'

'Who?' said Snubs, beginning to blink.

'Oh, Snubs, I know I oughtn't to have looked, but of course it was too late once I'd started. There was a block of note-paper in that suitcase, and it fell out when I picked it up.'

'What? Yes, I know there was. I packed it in case ——'

'*You* packed it? But it's in Beaky's writing. It's got his name at the end. And, Snubs, it's the most marvellous proposal!'

'Good Lord! To Miss Shirley?'

'To Sylvia — yes. You do know about it, then? Oh, has he sent it, or was that a copy of it, or what does it mean? Are they engaged, Snubs? Why didn't you tell me? I've never been so absolutely —— Why, what's the matter? Don't look like that!'

But Snubs continued to look like that and more than that. His unlucky, bungling, impatient friend! So that was why he had waited in vain for post after post. So that was why his nerves had been frayed to tatters, and no answer had ever come.

'My hat!' he muttered. 'Of all the footling explanations. Of all the —— No, of course they're not engaged. He never sent it.'

'Oh, Snubs! Why not?'

'Well, he thought he did, and he must have sent something else instead. Of all the ——'

'What! Oh, poor Beaky — doesn't he know?'

'You bet he doesn't. He's been waiting for her to answer him for days.'

'Oh, how awful, Snubs. Oh, *poor* Beaky! Oh, what a filthy shame! Oh, I must send it on to her at once. Or do you think I ought to ——'

'To tell him? I don't know. He'll go mad when he hears.'

'But it'll look so odd unless one of us can forge his writing on the envelope. Do you think you could?'

'No. I won't risk it.'

'Well, I can't. I never can forge anything. I'm hopeless at it. Oh, poor, darling Beaky!'

'Um,' said Snubs. 'Well, I suppose I'll see him when I get back. I'll have to break it to him. But I tell you ——'

'To-day, you mean? You're going straight on?'

'I must.'

'Oh, Snubs — I can't bear it.'

The tingling sensation. Snubs rose to his feet.

'In fact,' he said, in a tone that shocked him with its unexpected and quite unintentional brutality, 'we ought to start. At once.'

'I see,' said Noodles. 'All right.'

'I mean ——'

'No, it's all right. I'd forgotten for a moment. You've done far too much for me already. I — I'll just get those things from upstairs.'

Snubs hadn't moved when she came down again.

'I can't help it, Noodles,' he said.

'I know you can't. Dear Snubs.'

'Oh, shut up,' growled Mr. Tipton.

A little later they drove away from the Fox and Hounds without having spoken to each other again. And in silence they passed the scene of yesterday's misfortunes on Wissingfield Common. And between half-past eleven and twelve Noodles made the most

terrible, desperate face and dug her nails fiercely into the palms of her hands. For she was back in Pippingfold, and they were just turning into the entrance of the Manor House.

And then:

'Oh!' she cried. 'Oh, Snubs! There are two huge cars by the front door, and one of them's just like Mrs. Shirley's. Oh, what on earth do you think has happened?'

4

'Here she is,' said several people in the hall.

'Hullo, Noodles,' said one or two of them.

'Is this Ursula?' said another. 'Why, she's just like what I was. Isn't she, Joe? Where have you been, darling?'

'Oh!' said Noodles. 'It's Aunt Caroline. Oh, how extraordinary! Oh, what fun!'

She ran and kissed Mrs. Millet.

'Hullo, Mrs. Shirley,' she added. 'Hullo, Sylvia. Hullo, Beaky.'

She looked at the remaining member of the party — an elderly gentleman in horn-rimmed spectacles — but failed to recognize him. And where in the world was Mr. Cottenham?

'My niece, Joe,' said Mrs. Millet. 'Ursula, darling, this is Mr. Prescott. My solicitor.'

'Oh,' said Noodles. 'How do you do, Mr. Prescott?'

They shook hands.

'Quite remarkable,' said Mr. Prescott — which struck Noodles as quite a remarkable reply.

'Look here,' said Beaky. 'Noodles!'

'What?'

'Didn't you hear what Aunt Caroline said? Where on earth have you been?'

'Oh,' said Noodles. 'With Snubs, of course. Where's Mr. Cottenham?'

'Who's Snubs?' inquired Mrs. Millet.

'Snubs Tipton, Aunt Caroline. Where is he? Snubs, darling, I'm so sorry. This is my aunt. This is Mrs. Shirley. This is Sylvia. This is Mr. Prescott.'

'How do you do?' said Snubs, looking fiercely at each character in turn — with the exception of Sylvia, at whom he looked with intense curiosity and instant approval. 'What happened,' he added, 'was that my foul car came to pieces. So Noodles spent the night at a pub.'

'And,' said Noodles, regardless of the general interest aroused by this statement, 'poor Snubs spent the night in a ditch. Wasn't it sweet of him?'

'Rot,' said Snubs. 'I spent the night in my foul car.'

'But in a ditch, too,' said Noodles. 'He did really, Aunt Caroline.'

'Of course,' said Mrs. Millet. 'I quite understand. Thank you, Mr. Tipton. We all understand, and we're very grateful to you. I've just been staying with your parents, you know, and I shall write and tell them how very kind you've been. It's what I'd have expected, though, after all their kindness to me. Joe! Stop clicking your tongue like that.'

Mr. Prescott stopped clicking his tongue, and nobody else had even thought of clicking theirs. There was only one possible motto for a gathering of reasonable beings who had heard and seen Mr. Tipton and Miss Brett, and it is a pretty good motto at any time. *Honi soit qui mal y pense.*

'I told them,' said Mrs. Millet, 'that she'd be perfectly safe with you, Mr. Tipton. But you must let me know what your out-of-pocket expenses have been, and ——'

'Oh, I say. No, really ——'

'—— and I'll see that she settles up with you. Do you hear, Ursula?'

'Oh, of course, Aunt Caroline. But — but ——'

'But what?'

'I mean, of course I ought to pay him back, and I was going to — if I ever got any more money. But, Snubs, I must pay those other people first — at Newcliff, you know, and ——'

'I don't want it,' said Snubs. 'You don't owe me anything. If Beaky'd been there ——'

'But he wasn't. Beaky — what happened to you? Why did you leave us? Oh, won't somebody please explain why everyone's here, and what it all means. Is Mr. Cottenham ill?'

Mr. Prescott coughed.

'Perhaps ——' he began.

'Shut up, Joe,' said Mrs. Millet. 'Ursula, darling, I'll explain. Mr. Cottenham has gone abroad, to a healthier climate, and I don't think he's coming back. I suppose he's the only case on record of a dishonest man who was too mean to spend the money he'd stolen, and it's all there — including this house — for you and your brother. Joe Prescott would have taken half an hour telling you that, and you wouldn't have understood him even then. But it's perfectly true, and you needn't ever worry about it again. You and Reginald will each have rather over fifteen hundred a year.'

'What!' cried Noodles. 'Do you mean pounds, Aunt Caroline?'

'I mean pounds.'

'Each of us? Fifteen hun—— Beaky! Do you hear that? Snubs — Sylvia —— Oh, I can pay every-

one back after all! Oh, how absolutely marvellous! Oh, poor Mr. Cottenham — will he have anything left?'

'Rather more than he's handed over,' said Mrs. Millet. 'He was a rich man when your poor father —— Why, what's wrong?'

For Noodles had scowled horribly, and fled out of the front door.

'Noodles!' shouted her brother. 'What are you doing?'

He would have followed, but Sylvia caught his arm.

'Wait,' she said. 'No, please, Beaky. She did that once before when I asked something about your father, and it's just that she can't help it. I'll go out and tell her about something else.'

She smiled at her mother, and at Mrs. Millet, and even at Mr. Prescott. And just as she was leaving the hall, she looked back and smiled at Snubs Tipton.

And she smiled at Beaky again, and nodded — as though releasing him from some vow.

'Tell Snubs?' he asked.

'Yes,' said Sylvia, and went out into the hot sunlight.

'Noodles!' she called gently.

Noodles looked round the side of the historical laurel-bush.

'Oh,' she said, 'I'm afraid I was rather rude.'

'They all understood,' said Sylvia.

'I was a bit upset.'

'Of course you were.'

'Not about being rich, I mean. I'm thrilled about that.'

'It is rather thrilling,' said Sylvia. 'Your aunt's going to take a house in London, you know, and I expect you'll have even more fun than I did.'

'It makes me quite sick,' said Noodles.

'Well, don't let's talk about it. We're all going to have a picnic later on, and Beaky ——'

'Oh!'

'What is it?'

'Oh, Sylvia. Something terribly important. Come through this hedge. I'm going to do the most awful thing. But you mustn't give me away.'

'What are you talking about?'

'It's poor Beaky,' said Noodles. 'He wrote a letter to you ——'

'What!'

'Yes, and he never sent it — by accident. And I found it last night all among his pyjamas and things, and I'm afraid I looked at it, but you mustn't tell him, and — and this is it.'

The letter appeared suddenly from a rather strange substitute for a pocket.

'It's rather hot and crumpled, I'm afraid,' said Noodles. 'And now I'll leave you.'

'No,' said Sylvia.

'But I must. I couldn't possibly stand here while you read it.'

But she did, because Sylvia was already reading it, and one couldn't leave her when she hadn't answered one.

'Well?' said Noodles, after a very long time.

'Thanks most awfully,' said Sylvia, looking up with a smile. 'I suppose I may keep it?'

'He's — he's awfully fond of you,' said Noodles.

'I know,' said Sylvia. 'He told me so just after we got here — before your aunt turned up. He was a little indistinct, but — well, I just managed to hear him. Darling Noodles, I hope you'll be pleased about it, too; but we're engaged.'

The party in the hall heard a piercing yell from the garden, and looked at each other in some alarm.

'It's only Noodles,' said her brother, with a slight blush. 'I think Sylvia must have told her.'

5

Cars dashed to and from Pippingfold that day, and one of them removed Mr. Prescott and the exceedingly clear statement which Mr. Cottenham had left behind on the hall table, and came back again with Mrs. Millet's maid and a steamer-trunk. And another returned to Newcliff and came back with the Shirleys' luggage, for even if the new boiler were still lying in the yard at Green Hatches, there were other ways and means of raising enough hot water in weather like this and circumstances like these. And yet another — the repentant Gertie, in fact — ambled about the countryside collecting provisions from shops which were really closed and from farms which were sunk in a Whitsun coma, but were unable to resist the subtle and tireless blandishments of Mr. W. G. Tipton.

Noodles shared the front seat again during these forays, for Sylvia and Beaky had shown a sublime indifference to the prospect of a complete famine, and had quite given up listening to or looking at anyone but each other, and had already begun behaving so exactly like an engaged couple that the only thing to do was to treat them as though they were as invisible as they evidently imagined themselves to be.

'It's quite lucky, in fact,' said Noodles, 'that I've got you to talk to.'

And Snubs looked at her, and she went on talking to him, and told him a great deal about everything — which he found extremely interesting — and especially

about the wonderful way that everything had come right, and about how she had once thought that she was sorry she was grown-up, but now she was most tremendously glad.

And Snubs looked at her, and said he was glad, too.

And Noodles said she was afraid it would be rather lonely for him without Beaky, but perhaps he could find someone else. And anyhow they must all go on seeing each other in London, and if Aunt Caroline really found people to ask her out to dances — as she had promised — then Snubs must try and come too, if he could bear it, and would he swear to ask her to dance with him — if he wouldn't hate it?

And Snubs looked at her, and said he'd make a point of it.

And Noodles thanked him, and began to sing.

And Snubs looked at her, and said nothing.

So they came back again with enough supplies to provide a series of picnics for both to-day and to-morrow. And Sylvia and Beaky were forcibly separated, and they all played a lot of tennis on the court at Green Hatches, and talked, and laughed, and danced, and were very polite to Mrs. Millet and Mrs. Shirley — that is to say, whenever they saw them, which wasn't often because they were always disappearing together and talking (it was to be presumed) about gardening and furnishing and hotels. And nobody could remember a finer Whit-Sunday or Whit-Monday as long as they had lived.

But on Monday evening they had to start saying good-bye, because Snubs and even the affluent Beaky had got to be at their offices at half-past nine the next morning, and the others were staying behind — at any rate, said Mrs. Shirley and Mrs. Millet, for a day or

two. Everyone, they said, must have a little rest after the holidays, and there can be very little doubt that they were right. Even the engaged couple knew in their innermost hearts that it was better to part this evening than to risk an anti-climax before breakfast; and they would be seeing each other on Thursday, or Friday at latest; and the sooner they did part, then the sooner they could begin writing letters to each other. They didn't say this, but there can be no question that they were both aware of it, and it is a curiously important ingredient in being really and truly engaged.

So the last picnic came to an end, and Gertie came wobbling out of the coach-house — passed for general service by the great Carter himself — and the suitcase was flung on top of the spare-wheel and its bracket in the dickey, and Sylvia and Beaky said they would be back in a minute and vanished into the kitchen-garden, and Mrs. Millet and Mrs. Shirley said they couldn't wait any longer and vanished into the house. And Noodles stood by the two-seater, into which Snubs had already packed himself, and drew a series of lines with her finger on the dusty surface of one of the crumpled wings.

'I hate it all ending,' she said.

'Yes,' said Snubs. 'It's been rather fun.'

'It's been perfect,' said Noodles. 'I'll never forget how you came and rescued me.'

'Oh, that's all right,' said Snubs.

Noodles drew another line.

'You know,' she said, 'Beaky thinks he's awfully noble because he proposed to Sylvia just before he found out how rich he was — and of course it does make it much nicer for them both. But —— Oh, dear, I've forgotten what I was going to say.'

'That's all right,' said Snubs.

'Well, I haven't,' said Noodles, looking very hard at him. 'What I was going to say was that it wasn't a quarter as noble as spending the night in a ditch. So there!'

With these words she scowled horribly, turned round, and bolted indoors. Snubs was still staring at the point where she had disappeared, when Beaky came to take his place by his side.

'Where's Noodles?' he asked.

'Gone in.'

'Oh. Well, say good-bye to her for me, will you, darling?'

'All right,' said Sylvia.

Gertie roared away down the drive, and turned the corner into the lane. There was a look of extraordinary determination and purpose on the driver's face. He was a philosopher, and Noodles was only eighteen. But they needn't think that anyone else was going to have her in the end.

Because they jolly well weren't . . .

THE END

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